

2008

# The Holocaust in French film : Nuit et brouillard (1955) and Shoah (1986)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.y3vc-6k7d>  
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THE HOLOCAUST IN FRENCH FILM: *NUIT ET BROUILLARD* (1955) and *SHOAH*  
(1986)

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Erin Brandon

August 2008

UMI Number: 1459690

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ABSTRACT  
THE HOLOCAUST IN FRENCH FILM: *NUIT ET BROUILLARD* (1955) and *SHOAH*  
(1986)

by Erin C. Brandon

During World War II, France gave up its sovereignty and individual identity to a puppet government called the Vichy Regime. Led by Henri-Phillipe Pétain, this government collaborated with the Nazis and carried out German policies. When the war ended, however, the new government led by Charles de Gaulle was ashamed by these memories, and quickly tried to re-establish France's collective identity. To do this, de Gaulle repressed the reality of French collaboration and the troubling role it played in the Holocaust. The result of this suppression was that France faced a crisis in consciousness where society was unable to express its trauma and guilt over the Holocaust. The two documentary films *Nuit et brouillard* (1955) and *Shoah* (1986) provided a medium by which to remember the past, allowing the French to reclaim their memory of the Holocaust through the use of searing imagery and testimony.

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea for this thesis began in 2000 while I was a student in Bordeaux, France. On my daily walk to the University I would always pass by a street where there was a police car stationed outside a simple, non-descript building. Fascinated by the importance of a building that employed two gendarmes every day, I decided to walk down this quiet street and get a closer look. What I discovered was that this was Bordeaux's main synagogue. Having spent most of my undergraduate studies on the history of the Holocaust, I became interested in how anti-Semitism still played such a negative role in the lives of Bordeaux's Jews. What began to fascinate me was how the current anti-Semitism, largely coming from the growing North African immigrant and pro-Palestine community, fit into the histories of anti-Semitism in Bordeaux, the anti-Semitism of World War II and the Holocaust in France.

A series of questions intrigued me. What role did this anti-Semitism have in the memory of Bordeaux's citizens past and present? Why were there no monuments or works of art to commemorate the Holocaust in Bordeaux, especially because during World War II there was an internment camp located on the city's outskirts, and trains filled with Bordeaux's Jews often left the main train station headed for Auschwitz? Was this suppression of the past the cause for the synagogues' heightened protection? How divisive were the concealments of this remembrance in a city such as Bordeaux, or a country such as France, where there is a conflict, as de Gaulle once stated, "between



appeals to renewal and sirens of decline, between nostalgia for the great rare moments of unity and the many instances of Franco-French internal conflict.”<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, it seemed that the study of history and memory in Bordeaux and France would be difficult because of French society’s varying perceptions of the past. Memory lives in the mind of those who experienced the events. The memory of citizens is generated by their different social groups, political ideologies, and communities. The history of a time period is rooted in factual, scholarly work that is constructed for a universal audience, not a specific group. However, in light of the current anti-Semitism in Bordeaux and France, I wanted to know if there was a possibility of creating a “collective memory” of the Holocaust through the use of history as an educational tool. Could this shaping of memory alleviate some of the anti-Semitism in post-Millennial France?

The historiography of the twentieth century and the new focus it places on what Pierre Nora calls the “history of memory” helped to legitimize my studies of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Henry Rousso defined this study as “the focus on the content of social practices whose purposes or effect is the representation of the past and the perpetuation of its memory within a particular group or the society as a whole.”<sup>2</sup> This definition attracted my attention because it described how the memory of a group, for this case the Jews, could influence the whole society and their knowledge of that history. I

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), vii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

therefore wanted to find a form of representation whose influence extended over different groups within French society.

To begin my analysis, I had to determine what aspects of post-war society, politics, and culture led to the minimization of “history and memory” in France. I decided that film would be the best form of representation because visual images seem to have a decisive impact on the formation of a common, if not collective, memory. I then had to determine what films were made in France about the Holocaust during the post-war years, and find two filmmakers that asked themselves the questions: How are French people of various ages and outlooks going to be influenced by the representations presented to them in a film about the Holocaust? Are they going to understand the Holocaust’s role as a catalyst for the current period of deep crisis in France’s national unity and identity?

My search began on a cold December day in the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, located on the outskirts of Limoges. This “martyred village” was left in ruins so as to freeze a single moment in time and commemorate the morning of June 10, 1944, when SS officers marched in and killed the inhabitants. Now used for the mourning and memory of World War II in France, Oradour speaks to the long, painful, and divisive struggle that the French society has gone through since 1944 to come to terms with itself after the war. In her comprehensive book on Oradour-sur-Glane, Sarah Farmer sheds light on the struggle to memorialize Oradour as a symbol of French victimization, as well as Charles de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic’s use of Oradour as a way to avoid uncomfortable political tensions. She also focuses on the outcomes of the Bordeaux trial,

where the Alsatian perpetrators were absolved of their crimes in 1953, in an attempt to diminish the divisiveness of these atrocities and repair the national unity of France.

While the struggle over Oradour is one that blurs the distinction between French resisters, perpetrators and bystanders, not Jews, it can still be used as a mirror to reflect the troubled “history and memory” of France. I determined from my study of Oradour and its transformation that the years of 1944-1956 would be the first period I would analyze politically, socially, and culturally. This time period, described by Henry Rousso as the period of civil war, purge, and amnesty, was exceptional in its complete transformation from the Gaullist fight against the collaborationists of Vichy, and the memorialization of the Resistance, to the resulting forgiveness and “minimalization” of war-time atrocities; specifically Oradour and the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> The contradictions within this time period’s “history and memory” in France are a good start to focus on the vector of Holocaust memory. The film I found that best responded to the feelings of dissatisfaction with the nation during this time period, while at the same time dealing with the memory of the Holocaust, was Alain Resnais’ 1955 documentary *Nuit et brouillard*.

After choosing one documentary, I needed to find another film representation with which to analyze the evolution of collective representation and the memory of the Holocaust in France since 1956. To do this, I decided to focus on another French documentary film entitled *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann. Started in 1975, this epic film took eleven years to create and is eight-and-a-half hours in length. Wanting to discover

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10.

what political, social, and cultural currents in France led to the film's conception, I chose to look at the years of 1970-1986. What I discovered was that while this was a time of heightened Jewish consciousness around the world, in France this was a period of deep anti-Semitic sentiment that arose with the student protests of 1968, the death of Charles de Gaulle, and the political resurgence of the far Right.

With the focus of my study in place, I returned to my interest in the memory of the Holocaust in light of the heightened anti-Semitism in the city of Bordeaux and in the post-Millennial country of France. With the influx of immigrant populations, what influences in politics, society, and culture were leading to this anti-Semitism and what role, if any, had the two films I looked at had on the collective memory of the Holocaust?

To answer the question about creating a collective Holocaust consciousness among the current immigrant populations in France, I hypothesized that the answer might be found in the way France, in its other period of anti-Semitic crisis after World War II, tried to create a collective culture of the "history and memory" of the Holocaust. The resulting thesis is a look at how the culture of Holocaust memory can be found through the analysis of the two French documentary films *Nuit et brouillard* (1955) and *Shoah* (1986). These films, and the way they were perceived in light of French post-war politics and society, contributed to the realization of a collective Holocaust memory because they provided searing imagery and testimony into the trauma and horror caused by the Holocaust. This memory must now be inculcated in the current immigrant populations so as to improve the lives of Jews in modern France.

## CHAPTER 1

### FRANCE SINCE 1944: HISTORY AND MEMORY IN THE POSTWAR YEARS

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, while standing on the balcony of the Hotel de Ville in Paris, France, Charles de Gaulle uttered the following words:<sup>1</sup>

Paris! Paris humiliated! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, but by its own people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and aid of France as a whole, of fighting France, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France.<sup>2</sup>

In this discourse, de Gaulle commented on the martyred victims of war and the “fighting” French of the resistance, establishing these individuals as the “true” and “eternal” heroes of France. A rallying cry for a unified nation, de Gaulle’s speech was accepted by his countrymen as expressing the mythological ideal of his post-Vichy France. His France, “the only France,” was one in which there was no mention of the allied forces. He never even mentioned the division between occupied France and Petain’s collaborationist Vichy government.

Under the Vichy regime, France had been a defeated nation which gave up its sovereignty and individual identity to a puppet government that carried out the German policies. The capitulation by the French was perceived by the foreign press as a result of the French “lack of moral fiber.”<sup>3</sup> It was in response to this perceived weakness that de Gaulle re-wrote history to include the “armies of France” as the liberators of the unified

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the translations of all passages originally written in French are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 5.

French people “as a whole.” This gave France back its identity as a respectable, strong, and moral nation.

The exceptionality of de Gaulle’s speech was that it diverted attention away from the unique issues of World War II and created a new history devoid of allied liberators, Nazi collaborators, ideological crises, and the Holocaust. De Gaulle’s attempts to assuage the nation’s grieving and suffering led to a period of “unfinished memory,”<sup>4</sup> where France was unable to come to terms with the tragedy it had suffered. Henry Rousso calls this state of affairs the “Vichy syndrome.”<sup>5</sup> This syndrome promoted the idea that since Vichy’s participation in the Holocaust had never happened; the resulting moral issues could be brushed under the carpet.

After World War I, there had been a lot of reflection, complete with national events to memorialize the dead. As Henry Rousso notes, World War I was a cataclysm that took one-and-a-half million French military lives and left another million visibly maimed. These men, walking reminders of the slaughter, helped memorialize the trenches and led to the symbolic embodiment of a nationally admired archetype: the combat veteran.<sup>6</sup>

The overarching message and value that these World War I survivors transmitted to the nation was “love of life, pride at not having buckled under, and a sense of having

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<sup>4</sup> Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 22.

stood by one's comrades and having been able to count on them."<sup>7</sup> It was with this message of pain and suffering that a new character for future generations could be created. As a result of these soldiers never losing their values, France could erect statues for infantrymen in each town square to memorialize their spirit of "pride" and remind all passers-by of the heroic victory of November 11, 1918, Armistice Day.

Unlike the period after World War I, when France participated in a more traditional method of grieving, the period after World War II was filled with the reconstruction of French nationality. Because of the need to limit the repercussions of the war, and because rival political forces attempted to exploit an ambivalent heritage to their advantage, collective memory of events quickly crystallized around a small set of central ideas and images.<sup>8</sup>

In France, there was no look into the recent past because it was something to be forgotten, not glorified. Defeated and occupied by the Germans in 1940, France lost more than half a million people during the next five years. However, only a third died with a weapon in their hand. The rest vanished in deportations, executions, massacres, and as non-combatants in the French colonies. Because these deaths had not resulted from defending the nation's "pride," the traditional forms of commemorations used after World War I were ignored.

Though de Gaulle focused on the image of France resisting Nazi invaders, the integration of the Resistance played a more prominent role in the politics presented by the

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<sup>7</sup> Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants, 1914-1940* (Paris: Gallimard/Juillard, 1977), 47.

<sup>8</sup> Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 16.

political Left and the Communists during the elections of 1944-1947. Rousso highlights that during the Fourth Republic two-thirds of its elected officials had been associated with the Resistance and Free France.<sup>9</sup> Many celebrations during this time period focused on the liberation or victory, which created symbols and memories that only partially captured the true events of the war. Therefore, the memory of the war was developed outside what would be considered the “official” frameworks of history, contributing to the “Vichy syndrome” because no one could agree upon a proper way of mourning.

Two good examples of the Communist party and the political Left honoring the clandestine movements during the war were Armistice Day 1944 and the ceremony for Georges Mandel on July 7, 1946. For the celebration of November 11, 1944, the *National Front*, a periodical of the Communist mass organization noted: “[This] is in homage to the soldiers of 1914-1918, to the heroes who for four years have been fighting outside France as well as on the very soil of the fatherland.”<sup>10</sup> By using World War I as a vehicle by which to discuss World War II, the Communist party was referring to the “outside” fighters of France as those participating in the secret movements of the Free French in London, the men in Algiers, and the Communist leader Maurice Thorez in Moscow, more aptly referred to as the “soil of the fatherland.” Clearly the Communist party was focusing on the liberation or victory, not the shameful period of occupation.

The commemoration of July 7, 1946, is another example of how the memory of World War II was shrouded in secrecy by the political Left. Rousso recounts that in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>10</sup> Gerard Namer, *Batailles pour la mémoire: La Commémoration en France de 1945 à nos jours* (Paris: Papyrus, 1983), 20. This work deals with the major commemorations of the Liberation.



presence of Paul Reynaud, Léon Blum, Edouard Daladier, and Albert Varennes, all representing the government, a monument to Georges Mandel was unveiled in the forest of Fontainebleau. Mandel, who had been executed by the Milice, was memorialized with a stone on which was engraved: "Here died Georges Mandel, murdered by the enemies of France on 7 July 1944. When he fell bloody in the dust, victory's hands closed his eyelids."<sup>11</sup> These "enemies" were never named on this stone. They remained nameless and faceless in a deliberate omission of France's involvement in the war. Instead of focusing on the *miliciens* of Pétain's Vichy Regime, the engraving focuses on the Resistance, or "victory's hands." This type of monument is an example of the French people's desire to omit guilt they felt over collaboration. Instead of erecting statues, authorities maintained a discreet silence about the war and its memories. Monuments were extremely rare, and most of the memorials honored the dead of both wars, listing the names of those killed between 1939-1945 under the already predominant list of those killed during 1914-1918 and thus diverting attention away from the unfortunate aspects of World War II.

Henry Rousso states that the time period between 1944-1947 was a rocky period of mourning in France. A conflict quickly arose within the political scene of postwar France with the inconsistent use of the Occupation and the launch of the Gaullist myth. He remarks:

Classical republican democracy was so deeply rooted in French habits that the party organizations (even in parties that had been faint-hearted or absent between 1940-1944)

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<sup>11</sup> Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 22.

were probably more genuinely popular in 1945 than were the committees of unknown heroes.<sup>12</sup>

The postwar citizens wanted to cling to the reassuring image of the resistance fighter in France, but their desire to return to normalcy and to forget the circumstances of the Occupation hampered any real memorialization of the Resistance. This, he believes, gave rise to a growing tension within the unified national memory of the war and led to political upheaval and internal divisions.

This tension divided the Left and the Right. In opposition to the Gaullist myth of military power and the Communist emphasis on the clandestine struggles and anti-Fascist Resistance was a rising tide of anticommunism in light of the Cold War. As the government shifted away from the Left, France witnessed a revival of “neo-Vichyite” sentiment that manifested itself in the country’s memories of war.

In response to the purge, or the criminalization of all those involved with Pétain and his government by the Left-wing in the late 1940s, the Right-wing wanted to revitalize French nationalism without the memory, or negative stigma, of the Occupation. Right-wing extremists called for an end to the civil war raging between people committed to the Resistance, or de Gaulle, and those aligned with Pétain. One neo-Vichyite, Michel Dacier, wrote that France had become “habituated to hatred and, even worse, suspicion.”<sup>13</sup> Playing to the uncertainty of French sentiments towards the war and its memory, the Right-wing politicians wanted to re-write history to fit their own construct. One example is what Roger Nimier wrote about the past:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 29.

The lights of June 1940 and of the summer of 1944 are now fused; despair and joy balance each other in a shameful equilibrium, which we repudiate. Vichy, Gaullism, Collaboration-these belong to history. Neither victory nor defeat: the situation as it exists in 1945 has left us free. I am well aware that some would dig up the cadavers beneath our feet to tell us that we must carry on along the one and only path to glory. But in the absence of humanity-and that is what is most sorely missed-comes fatigue.

In Nimier's desire to recast the image of the Right during the war, he denies the relevance of the Vichy regime, comparing it to the Gaullist Left and stating that all the despair and joy of the time period should be viewed by the public as equal. Instead of asking people to remember the events during the war, Nimier states that such memories cause only "fatigue." He therefore calls for humanity to reject the Left and its desire to purge the society of the "cadavers" or collaborationists.

This Right-wing nostalgia, which was carefully constructed by men like Nimier, helped to create a deep opposition towards the Left that fueled a new movement against the Resistance. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the counterrevolutionaries and nationalists on the Right started to refer to their counter-purge as "résistantialisme," with the word "résistant" being added to depict the arrogance or boldness displayed by Resistance members towards the Right-wing after the war. One Catholic priest, named Desgranges, explained this point of view when he wrote:

Résistantialisme is to the Resistance what clericalism is to religion, what liberalism is to liberty, and, as Sartre might say, what nausea is to life. It is the exploitation of a sublime epic by the tripartite gang under Communist leadership.<sup>14</sup>

Speaking out against the purge and its exploitation of men he believed to be innocent of any crime, Desgranges blamed the "Communists" and other government officials for ganging up on the Right.

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<sup>14</sup> Abbé Desgranges, *Les Crimes masqués du résistantialisme* (Paris: L'Elan, 1948), 10.

The result of this resurgence in Right-wing power was that the government and society shifted their focus away from the positive role played by the Resistance in World War II and started to focus on the absolution of collaborationists as a way to promote national unity and erase the negative memory of Vichy and its criminal actions. The most shocking political victory for the Right came on February 21, 1953, when amnesty was granted to the perpetrators of a mass killing in the village of Oradour-sur-Glane.

Oradour was a small village on the outskirts of Limoges where on the morning of June 10, 1944, Nazi soldiers marched in, massacred 642 residents of the village, and burned its structures to the ground, including the Catholic Church. Shortly after the news of this devastating event, German and Vichy authorities in Limoges tried to limit public discussion about the circumstances. According to the French censorship office of the Limoges newspapers, they “deemed it preferable for the press to be silent about this affair.”<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Communist and Resistance organizations used Oradour as a symbol of military barbarity, and the village became their opportunity to strike against Vichy and the German Occupation. Groups closely aligned with de Gaulle stated that:

French know their duty. In order to avoid that all of France experience such crimes, by the thousands they rise up in the liberating fight. Limousins, against the terror of the Nazi hordes, against traitors of the Milice in the service of the Boches, join the ranks of the fighters without delay.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Before Oradour, little was reported about Germans engaging in widespread killings of French civilians. However, after the atrocities of that June morning were reported throughout France, the Resistance found a rallying cry in its cause against the Nazis and Pétain, and began reporting assassinations, executions, and hangings of resisters.<sup>17</sup> The result was that the Vichy press published its own opinions of the Oradour murders.

Blaming the incidents of Oradour on its citizens, who were believed to be disloyal to Pétain, the Vichy officials saw the actions of the Germans as a way to repress the increased activity of the Communists or *maquis* in the area. In a report written for the Vichy prefect in Limoges, Pierre Trouille stated that:

One had the distinct feeling that the Occupier wanted to strike fear into the population and change their opinion by showing them that the evils they were suffering were the direct consequence of the existence of the *maquis* and that they had made the mistake of tolerating them.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately in the case of Oradour, the German forces had made a mistake, and there was never a *maquis* or Resistance group in the village.

Upon the realization of this fact, the arguments by the Vichy officials quickly lost their bearing, and Oradour became a place of public memory regarding the suffering caused by the Germans and the Occupation in France. This reclamation of the village by the Resistance was solidified by Charles de Gaulle in March of 1945 when he called for the site to remain a martyred village, and by the National Assembly of 1946 and the first

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 45.

president of the Fourth Republic, Vincent Auriol, who voted to make Oradour a historic monument.<sup>19</sup>

By 1953 however, France was in the middle of a long national debate about how severely collaboration during the Occupation should be punished. This debate, mainly fueled by the Right-wing over their frustration at the negative repercussions Oradour was having on their movement, called for the French Parliament to promote leaving the past behind in a move towards reconciliation. It was in these circumstances that the resulting trial of the SS officers responsible for Oradour took place.

Starting on January 12, 1953, in Bordeaux, twenty-one soldiers were put on trial for the crime of murder. Of these soldiers, fourteen were from the Alsace region. The question that was posed was whether these French citizens had joined the Nazi army willingly, or whether they were forced into service. What emerged clearly from this trial was the reluctance of the court to deal with the French collective responsibility for the events committed during World War II. The National Assembly ignored and repressed certain facts about forced or voluntary conscription, which resulted in an acquittal on February 21, 1953 when the Alsatians were freed. This event led to the stripping of postwar memories from the Left, reinforcing the Vichy syndrome and unfinished mourning in France.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 59.

### *Jewish Memory in Postwar France*

The repression of memory by de Gaulle, the Left, and the Right definitely served as a missed opportunity for the nation to remember the evils of World War II. Another casualty of this Vichy syndrome was the memory of Jewish deportees, whose ordeals during the war were not allowed to occupy their own place in French history and memory. When the first survivors of the Nazi concentration camps started to return to Paris, they were faced with rejection and repression. This bitterness and misunderstanding from the French society caused an important conflict regarding the memory of the Holocaust in France.

This conflict was that the events of Nazi concentration camps were the most quickly effaced from French memory. In the ceremonies established to celebrate the Liberation between 1944-1946, the participants in the striped pajamas were banished from official commemorations as a way to protect the spectators who had glimpsed these victims with the most terrible shock.<sup>20</sup> Due to this purge of historical events, society was not allowed to face its guilty conscious, which caused a distortion of memory and an inability to understand the atrocities of the Holocaust.

This rejection of Jewish memory was problematic as victims tried to bear witness to the horrors they faced during the war. An example of this ambiguous response from the French society is seen in this account by Emmanuel Mounier in September 1945:

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<sup>20</sup> Rouso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 25.

The victims are still a nuisance. Why, some of them are even disfigured. Their complaints are tiresome for those whose only wish is to return as quickly as possible to peace and quiet.”<sup>21</sup>

By seeing the Jews as a “nuisance,” who were not letting society return as quickly as possible to a desired “peace and quiet,” this man’s inability to find compassion for these victims is a clear indication of what the post-Vichy period created in society: feelings of ambivalence, fear, and bitterness. This ambivalence towards human suffering and genocide, compounded with this insistence that life must return to normalcy after it had been “disfigured,” for fear that the disfigurement might damage France, became the excuse for the unfinished mourning encouraged by the post-Vichy society. Rather than mourn for what had happened, it was easier to ignore it and sweep or purge it from sight.

### *Modernization, A Way to Forget*

The French, disgusted with this turbulent period after the war and filled with bitter disappointment at their actions, decided to ignore their memory of the war and focus on new ways to define their nation. This shift in consciousness away from the tragedy of war, compounded with the unusual swiftness of French postwar modernization, led to a society with an identity more tied to the genuinely new decade of postwar France. Unable to come to terms with the internal injuries of World War II and unaided by their leaders, French citizens faced a crisis of memory that would overshadow every facet of culture. Simone de Beauvoir stated that during the postwar period: “No serenity was possible.

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<sup>21</sup> Beatrice Philippe, “Être juif dans la société française,” *Esprit* (Paris: Montalba/Pluriel, 1979): 372.



The war was over: it remained on our hands like a great unwanted corpse, and there was no place on earth to bury it.”<sup>22</sup>

On a national level, French society focused on the modernization of France as a way to bury the corpse of Vichy collaboration and define their new society. As Kristin Ross writes:

The speed with which French society changed after the war from a rural, empire-oriented, Catholic country into a fully industrialized, decolonized, and urban one meant that the things modernization needed—educated middle managers, for instance, or affordable automobiles and other ‘mature’ consumer durables, or a set of social sciences that followed scientific, functionalist models, burst onto a society that still cherished prewar outlooks with all of the force, excitement, disruption, and horror of the genuinely new.<sup>23</sup>

It was with this unusual swiftness towards modernization that people in France stopped thinking about the aftermath of the war and started displacing their feelings towards the acquisition of modern appliances, cars, items from magazines, and white collar jobs. They found that the repetitive focus on daily practices like shopping and consumerism created a break with the terrible memory of the past and gave the illusion of moving on from their pre-war “outlooks” to the genuinely new.

In a brief period of time, the social relations in France shifted drastically from being centered on the nation to being based around objects. Quickly, people became focused on the rote movements of objects and looked to these consumer goods to dictate their gestures and movements. Instead of looking to society or the government for

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<sup>22</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

answers, France became united in looking to industry because, unlike the government during this time, it was the most stable.

One of the largest industries in France before and after the war was the automobile manufacturer Renault. With a concentration of thousands of workers on the outskirts of Paris, Renault's factory supplied its burgeoning workforce with an escape from the memories of war and allowed them to focus on the actions of an assembly line: "A mountain of cement [where one hears] the rumbling of a thousand machines, where men make the same precise movement eight hours a day all along a line."<sup>24</sup> While these "precise" movements produced cars, or objects for the masses, they also supplied the society with something that would bring them together. Worker and consumer were both tied to the creation and acquisition of the car, something that became imbedded in everyday life. The car became the focus for the society as a whole and the symbolic way of transferring focus away from that which was unpleasant, allowing people to experience the sensation of feeling "gradually enveloped and anesthetized" by an object with which "Time [stood] still."<sup>25</sup>

The role of the car in French society was that it allowed for the assimilation of individuals into a shared community, one focused on consumerism. With this shared interest, French identity was reinvigorated and cleaned by the wave of modernization. Similar to the purges of memory experienced after the Holocaust, in the postwar years the French desired to purge their society of undesirable aspects, to "propel [themselves]

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Guy Herzlich, "Adieu Billancourt," *Le Monde* (March 29, 1992), 25.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Crosland, *The Assembly Line* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 14.

towards the goal of cleanliness and moral progress.”<sup>26</sup> This progress came with the invention of domestic hygiene, or the ability to clean away the dirt from the body and the home.

The rapidity of household goods and appliances ending up in the domiciles of war-torn France was an indication that after World War II, the innermost structure of society was looking to cleanse itself morally. Kristin Ross observes that within the postwar atmosphere the woman was seen as the subject of everydayness, that repetitive functionary within the society. Therefore, in light of this national cleansing, she became the one most subjected to and responsible for consumption. Ross also notes that the social existence of human beings was produced and reproduced by these women: “If the woman is clean, the family is clean, the family is clean, the nation is clean. If the French woman is dirty, then France is dirty and backward.”<sup>27</sup> Not wanting to subjugate France to more guilt over being “backward,” somehow weak and inferior, the French women in postwar France received self-assurance from her day-to-day focus of buying magazines, household cleaners, shampoos, refrigerators, and electric devices. The result was that society became obsessed with everything being orderly and clean. This obsession with purity included the morality of the nation.

The final advancement in the modernization in France was the moving picture. Similar to the repetition of the assembly line, or the day-to-day process of cleaning the

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<sup>26</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 74.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

house, film provided set qualities with movement, image, mechanization, and standardization.<sup>28</sup> The perception of subjects when seen on the cinema screen transformed the reality of the way individuals were seen in society:

This was probably the only area where [the individual] had learned everything from their own sensibilities. [Individuals] owed nothing to models. Their age and education made them members of that first generation for which the cinema was a given fact.<sup>29</sup>

The viewers of the film were no longer constrained by the conditions of the society around them. Instead, the viewers could be focused on the objects on the screen and could imagine a reality that was based around these images. The viewers were awarded the freedom to interpret the images with their own “sensibilities” and then create their own reality based on simply re-creating these images. The individual could copy the actions from the screen, making them the “first generation” able to make re-presented reality a “fact.”

This new focus in France on modernization, compounded with the commoditization of the object, helped to redefine French identity after the events of World War II. Collaboration and guilt over the Holocaust became things entirely of the past.<sup>30</sup> Modernization helped to gloss over and clean some of the societal issues that developed as a result of the war: anti-Semitism, class division, and racism. Modern France now became defined as a modern, progressive society with no visible class conflict. This image of harmony however, would soon be questioned by the cinema.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>29</sup> Georges Perec, *Les choses* (Paris: René Julliard, 1956), 55.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

### *Documentary Film: A Vehicle*

The documentary film genre gained widespread recognition in France during the late 1920s and early 1930s as a fusion between the cinema and various avant-garde forms of art of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> During this time, a type of voice or style was established in documentary film that imitated the corresponding art movements in France. One vehicle for this voice was the use of avant-garde art by modernist filmmakers. Classic examples of this type of film include the works in the 1920s by French impressionist artists and critics such as Jean Epstein (*L'Affiche*, 1925), French artist Marcel Duchamp (*Anemic Cinema*, 1927) and American expatriate Man Ray (*Rètour à la Raison*, 1923).<sup>32</sup> Within the avant-garde genre, there was a distinct point of view that refused to subordinate perspective and turned the realistic object into a subjective demonstration of what the filmmaker saw, not the accurate depiction. What began as the filmmaker's vision was constructed into imagery that invited the viewers to see the world afresh and to rethink their relation to it.

This avant-garde perspective gained momentum within documentary film circles with the use of *photogénie*, a form of editing or montage, that created a set composition and allowed the filmmaker's voice to become the emphasis of the film.<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2001), 88.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 89. *Photogénie* referred to what the film image offered that supplemented or differed from what it represented.

filmmaker, or artist, could show things in a new light which liberated the editor from the previous constraints of showing photographic images in sequence. This technique gave the filmmaker a narrative voice, linking past and present, memory and moral conscience. This form of early documentary was called the “performative documentary” because it focused on point-of-view shots, musical scores, renderings of subjective states of mind, and freeze frames.<sup>34</sup>

After World War II, this performative style of documentary film was used; it employed representations, mounted arguments, and formulated persuasive strategies to persuade the audience to accept the filmmaker’s view of the world. The value of the performative documentary film was that it disguised and transformed everyday behavior and personality into something that conveyed a sense of complexity.<sup>35</sup> In this new era of modern France, the “homme disponible”<sup>36</sup> or available man, stood out as emotionally indifferent to the world around him due to the constant changes that permeated every aspect of postwar society. Since the documentary film created an unobstructed view of society, it was seen as a lens to show the truth because it was detached from all movement and change. Its power was that it could imprint a message on the audience and create a collective response. The film was made as a response to the French unfinished mourning, so that as France tried to reconstruct its national identity during the postwar years, people could do so by exploring the continuum of memory and time.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, 22.

### *The Holocaust in Nuit et brouillard and Shoah*

The thirty-year period between 1955 and 1986 were formative years in the documentary film genre in France. Two films of note, *Nuit et brouillard* and *Shoah*, approached the Holocaust as a moral, historical, and educationally significant period in history. One of the questions faced by these documentary film directors, Alain Resnais (*Nuit et brouillard*) and Claude Lanzmann (*Shoah*), was how to convey the specific features of Nazi genocide while focusing on the broader critical, ethical, and theoretical issues of the Holocaust. The unconventional character of their subject, particularly in light of the post-Vichy syndrome, made each director focus on a different philosophical and artistic theme. The result was that each film analyzed and addressed the relationship between events and their representation in different ways.

Reverting back to the way film had been used in the 1920s and 1930s, as an artistic tool, Resnais utilized the haunting and personal quality of film to show what someone might have experienced in the camps and what it might feel like to undergo that experience. *Nuit et brouillard* called for an emotional responsiveness that acknowledged how understanding the Holocaust within any pre-established framework of imagery was utterly impossible.<sup>37</sup> By juxtaposing color images of currently empty extermination camps with the black and white documentary footage of camps in full use, Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* provides a powerful look at the issues of aesthetic representation, authenticity of experience, and identity formation. Made in 1955, ten

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 135.

years after the war, Resnais' film focuses on the memory of the forgotten sceneries of camps and their victims, not the perpetrators and bystanders who played a key role in Holocaust history. In light of post-Vichy France and the obliteration of memory, Resnais vividly displays the Holocaust with an emotional detachment that allows viewers to investigate their own responses. This process allows for the reconciliation of the French with their involvement in the Holocaust through the Vichy Regime.

Resnais uses images of Jews awaiting execution, victims suffering from the effects of medical research, and dead bodies whose glazed eyes seem to be gazing into the distance. By utilizing the avant-garde technique of manipulating the image and having it stand alone as a testimony to the struggles of the victims, the film forces the viewer to interpret and perceive the events of the Holocaust through the intertwined images of colorless victims and colorful landscapes and artifacts. Powerful in its rejection of moral judgment, *Nuit et brouillard* is a testimony to Resnais' interpretation of the Holocaust and his belief that the representation of the Holocaust should focus on the authentic experience, the documentary footage, and the present remnants of the camps (which in 1955 were far from distant memories). In effect, the result is an emotional manipulation of the audience through imagery.

In contrast to the immediacy of Resnais' work, Claude Lanzmann's film blends different art forms and philosophical beliefs. He produced something ground-breaking at that time in France with his film *Shoah*. Researched for eleven years, this film finally came to fruition in 1986, with its nine and a half hours of testimony from the perpetrators, bystanders, victims, and historians of the Holocaust. *Shoah*, unlike *Nuit et brouillard*,



does not rely on any original footage or authentic recreations. Instead, Lanzmann draws his material from interviews with survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders that he intersperses with shots of barren landscapes: the legacies of camps Treblinka, Chlemno, Sobibor, and Auschwitz.

Lanzmann analyzes how the spoken testimonies of Holocaust survivors can become a meaningful, cathartic connection to the historical past. Lanzmann does not use any archival footage because he feels this imagery should not be used to represent the traumatic past of human suffering. Such archival imagery for Lanzmann is not representative of the victims' authenticity of experience. He therefore rejects all images historical or reconstructed in his film.

In an effort to create a truly aesthetic and ethical film, a film in which society cannot witness the events visually because they are not presented in images but in words, Lanzmann succeeds in manipulating the audience in other ways. Lanzmann provides insight into his methodology when he interviews Nazi camp officers under false pretenses with hidden cameras, and when he forces sobbing victims to recall their horrifying experiences, even though they protest. This manipulation creates a deeper, more emotional connection between the viewer and the victim. The effectiveness of these moments is their recreation of trauma.

Lanzmann manipulates the viewer through his editing, interview settings, and line of questioning. Resnais' manipulation is his construction of images, sound, space, and time. These documentaries are directed by men who focused on the troubling questions that time and memory create in the psyche. Both films' analysis of memory of the

Holocaust was unique to France because of the obliteration of memories surrounding the events of World War II in light of de Gaulle and the post-Vichy syndrome.

In the years following World War II, France as a nation was unable to make peace with the events that occurred during the Occupation. This inability to look back was due to de Gaulle and his re-writing of history, the political upheaval of the purge, and the government divisions between the memory of World War II and its victims. Most notably, the theme of the Holocaust and the French participation in genocide were ignored. The two French documentary films, *Nuit et brouillard* (1955) and *Shoah* (1986), challenged and provoked the memory of the Holocaust, reflecting the French collective struggle with guilty conscience between 1955 and 1986.

## CHAPTER 2

### ALAIN RESNAIS and *NUIT ET BROUILLARD*

Born in the French town of Vannes near Brittany, Alain Resnais began his life on June 3, 1922, four years after the First World War. Although he was guarded about his personal life, especially in interviews, a few elusive details can be taken from Gaston Bounoure's study of Resnais' life. According to Bounoure, Resnais' life conjures up an image of a child nurtured and spoiled by his parents. Resnais apparently attended school infrequently, due to illness, and his passion for cinema developed early. When he was thirteen, his parents gave him a super-8 camera which he used to film local children and make a movie about the popular villain Fantômas.<sup>1</sup> Two years later in 1937, Resnais developed his ambitions for a career in the dramatic arts when he saw a production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* in Paris. Inspired to become an actor, Resnais enrolled in acting classes at the Cours René Simon for two years. Upon completion of these acting classes, he spent a year at the Paris film school IDHEC (Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques) in 1943.<sup>2</sup>

While Bounoure sheds some light on Resnais' artistic aspirations, he also dwells on his intellectual influences. Bounoure credits Resnais' mother with sparking his interest in the history of philosophy and social movements in France, and for introducing

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<sup>1</sup> Fantômas was one of the most popular fictional arch-villains in the history of French crime fiction. Fantômas was created in 1911 by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain. It was published by Arthème Fayard and appeared monthly from February 1911-September 1913 in a total of 32 volumes. The character cannot be underestimated, as he represents the transition from old-fashioned Gothic novel villains to modern-day serial killers. There were also a set of silent films about Fantômas produced by Gaumont and directed by Louis Feuillade from 1913 to 1914.

<sup>2</sup> René Prédal, *L'Itinéraire d'Alain Resnais* (Paris: Lettres Modernes Etudes Cinématographiques, 1996), 39.

him to French writer Marcel Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past*.<sup>3</sup> It is this novel that introduced Resnais to the concepts of disillusionment, nostalgia, and memory.

In Proust's novel, the protagonist sets out to rediscover his past with the hopes of finding the essence of his existence in the present. He focuses this search for lost time on specific childhood vignettes, from which he hopes to reclaim his consciousness.

However, the result of his journey back in memory is that: "When I awakened in the middle of the night, as I was ignorant as to where I found myself, I did not know in the first instance who I was."<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of Proustian memory not only has the effect of making the mind totter between two epochs, but forces it to choose between two mutually incompatible places. The resurrection of the past, says Proust, forces our mind to oscillate between years long past and the present time.<sup>5</sup>

What Proust does in his writing is search not only for lost time, but for lost space where moments occur "in the dizziness of an uncertainty like that which one experiences sometimes before an ineffable vision at the moment of going to sleep."<sup>6</sup> As a novelist, Proust strings the protagonist's life back together from the places he is in the present to the moments he has lived, so that all the places and moments become scattered across the pages. However, the destructive forces of time on these physical places leave the main

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<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bounoure, "Alain Resnais," *Cinéma d'aujourd'hui* 5 (Paris: Seghers, 1974), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Proust, *Du côté du chez Swann*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 5. All references are to the Pléiade edition.

<sup>5</sup> Georges Poulet, *Proustian Space* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, vol. III, 874.

character trapped between his exterior space and his interior space, or memory of this place.

Without these remembered places, beings would only be abstractions. It is these places that make a person's image precise, and gives the necessary support from which they can assign a specific memory to an event or place. In *The Remembrance of Things Past* time is reclaimed through memory and lost space is reclaimed by resurrecting and creating these places.<sup>7</sup>

A perfect example of retrieving space is the consumption of a madeleine. Proust asks the question, "Are places and moments lost forever?" He answers this with the episode of the madeleine by showing that the actual sensation of tasting the cookie with a cup of tea brings about the recovery of lost moments. From the depths of the protagonist's memory the past awakens, and his memory emerges to the surface, slowly mounting as the protagonist notes: "I experience the resistance, and perceive the confused murmur of the distances crossed over."<sup>8</sup> Resistance to the "sweetness of this interposed atmosphere" shapes the poetry of memory for Proust. Thanks to the memories generated by the taste of the madeleine, memory is not lost and consequently time and space are also saved.

The return of space and time for the main character brings back a past happiness, and he realizes that his deepest love is for a nostalgic phantom. This nostalgia is what

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<sup>7</sup> Poulet, *Proustian Space*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Proust, *Du côté du chez Swann*, vol. I, 46.

permeates the individuals and events of the novel, creating the artistic inspiration for Proust.<sup>9</sup> The madeleine is symbolic for Proust, and he uses patterns of imagery throughout the text to communicate something that is beyond the limits of ordinary articulation. He reaches the unconscious and preconscious of the reader.

By focusing on this unconsciousness, Proust creates a new kind of order. Just as a work of art creates its own patterns dominated by the unconscious and permitting the free flow of feelings within its own rigid set of standards, so too does Proust's novel create a timeless and accessible response for repressed emotions. His text seeks to communicate unconscious feelings within the highly structuralized form of literature.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the highly personal use of memory in Proust, Alain Resnais' films deal very rarely with his own memories; instead they focus on the qualities of memory, nostalgia, and forgetting. Looking beyond his personal history, Resnais explored cultural and popular memory, mass trauma and individual loss.<sup>11</sup> Captivated by Proust's use of nostalgia to communicate unconscious feelings in writing, Resnais enjoyed looking at the world through the eyes of the author rather than looking through the eyes of the reader. Resnais believed that, "literature is precisely that use of language which can purge pathos, and show that it is too figurative, ironic, and aesthetic."<sup>12</sup> Memory for Resnais

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<sup>9</sup> Milton L. Miller, *Nostalgia: A Psychoanalytic Study of Marcel Proust* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), 117.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Nostalgia: A Psychoanalytic Study of Marcel Proust*, 207.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Elaine Marks. *Marrano as Metaphor: The French Jewish Presence in French Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), iv.

was part of a broader network of issues and required mental or imaginative capacity. He stated: “I prefer to speak of the imaginary, or of consciousness. What interests me in the mind is that faculty we have to imagine what is going to happen in our heads, or to remember what has happened.”<sup>13</sup> Resnais’ cinema was his artistic instrument, and he used it to approach the workings of the mind.

While it is clear that Resnais’ films were influenced by the concepts of nostalgia and disillusionment, other writers have focused on Resnais’ interest in the artistic concept of Surrealism as the main inspiration for his work.<sup>14</sup> As a young boy, Resnais’ interest in the art of Ernst, Magritte, and other Surrealist artists was fueled by his readings of the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*,<sup>15</sup> which his father, a pharmacist, subscribed to in his shop. In his Surrealist Manifesto, André Breton said that the liberation of the individual could be achieved through exercising the imaginative faculties of the unconscious mind. Surrealism rejected the bourgeoisie and everything utilitarian or functional. Surrealism became the object of everything in the cultural past that refused separation, sought transcendence, or struggled against ideologies and the organization of the spectacle.<sup>16</sup> What Surrealism sought to do was separate art and the workings of the mind from the cultural rules of society, which Breton comments on in his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930):

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<sup>13</sup> Stéphane Goudet, “Revue de cinema: Alain Resnais,” *Positif* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002): 277.

<sup>14</sup> Emma Wilson, *Alain Resnais* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Minotaure* (1933-1939) was a Surrealist publication founded by Albert Skira in Paris.

<sup>16</sup> Jules-François Dupuis, *Histoire désinvolte du surréalisme* (Paris: Paul Vermont, 1977), 11.

In spite of the various efforts peculiar to each of those who used to claim kinship with Surrealism, or who still do, one must ultimately admit that, more than anything else, Surrealism attempted to provoke, from the intellectual and moral point of view, *a crisis of consciousness* of the most general and serious kind.<sup>17</sup>

Breton's interest in provoking the "intellectual and moral point of view" as well as his preoccupation with creating a "crisis of consciousness" linked Surrealism with Proust's interest in dreams and the cultivation of time and space. In the end Surrealism shed light on human possibilities and spectacle.

One of the tools that the Surrealist movement utilized was the cinema. The Surrealist film practice and theory was a response to French cinema in the 1920s and was started by revolutionary poets, philosophers, and painters. In response to Dadaism's cleansing of the cultural and social slate, Surrealism provided a new moral philosophy that was based around something more than pure aesthetics. The Surrealist view was: a film was worthy of interest to a degree that, operating within the spatial and temporal conventions of narrative cinema, it managed to bring some purity to the art of movement and light.<sup>18</sup> What this meant was that, when audiences opened their eyes in front of the screen, they must analyze the feelings that transport them and determine what caused their sublimation. To achieve this state, they must focus on their consciousness.

On the screen, objects were transformed to the point where they took on menacing or enigmatic meanings. The filmmaker's and the audience's job was to project a poetic value onto that which they did not yet possess, and to restrict their field of vision so as to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Hammond, ed., *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 2.



intensify the experience. These two properties helped create the cinematic décor and allowed the work to be judged by all who viewed it.<sup>19</sup>

For Resnais, Breton's definition of Surrealism and its implications in the cinema struck a chord because it implied that people express verbally, in writing, or by some other manner, the real functioning of thought. Resnais found this concept interesting because it dealt with the inner workings of the mind. He started to see the mind as an internal cinema where images, both virtual and real, coexisted. He readily incorporated these Surrealist concepts of abstract creativity and the focus on the abnormal and extreme into his own art, cinema, lifestyle, and fused them with his understanding of Proust's use of nostalgia to analyze the world. It is from these two concepts that Resnais developed his specific style that analyzed how the past, present, and future could be used to focus on the evolution of a specific moment in time.<sup>20</sup>

In 1944, upon completion of his studies, Resnais started his career in film by editing the director Nicole Védres's *Paris 1900* (1948). Resnais' interest in the visual composition of meaning was apparent from the start. Agnes Varda, the director of *La Pointe courte* (1956), which Resnais also edited, recalled: "He would explain to me that it was not possible for him: this cinema [the film Resnais was editing] was too close to what he himself was dreaming of doing."<sup>21</sup> With this keen desire to express himself, the editing work on *La Pointe courte* proved to be a catalyst for Resnais, and he realized his

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>20</sup> Rudolf E. Kuenzli. *Dada and Surrealist Film* (New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1987), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Bounoure, "Alain Resnais", 140.

directorial ambitions and came up with the idea of rethinking time in film, as Proust had done in literature.

By 1955, World War II had weakened French philosophy, culture, economy, and memory. With the political upheavals and tensions distorting the postwar government in France, the commercial cinema and artistic culture had reached a dangerous point of stagnation.<sup>22</sup> Moving past this stagnation, however, Resnais expressed his artistic freedom and explored three traumatic subjects of the twentieth century: *Guernica*, the Holocaust, and the dropping of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. Resnais ended the creative void caused by war and the postwar government by exploring the experience of physically and mentally marked victims and survivors of trauma. He developed a form of cinema that was structured on the temporality of traumatic experience.

Resnais turned his attention to the documentary film because it provided him with the freedom to tackle varied and original themes, while at the same time giving him the opportunity to use his ideas of exercising the imaginative faculties of the unconscious mind to represent his subjects, which were based around the conscripts of abstract, Surrealist art. In the first eleven years of his career, he directed five documentaries including; *Gauguin* (1950), *Guernica* (1950), *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), and *Toute la memoire du monde* (1956).

Unafraid to tackle controversial concepts, Resnais' early documentaries are meticulous in their use of art as a visual medium and the art of filmmaking.<sup>23</sup> He focused

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<sup>22</sup> Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film*, 453.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Alain Resnais*, 16.

the attention of the audience towards trauma and memory in his documentaries from 1948-1958 and reinforced his beliefs in not forgetting painful subjects. His early documentaries, including *Nuit et brouillard*, were used as a visual testimony to traumatic history, through visual art and the art of the filmmaker.

Each of these films has a similar temporal theme, and Resnais' avant-garde intellectualism fueled his desire to produce more advanced forms of film. Like other directors of his time, Resnais received his training by starting in editing, moving onto documentary films, and then on to feature presentations. His first feature film success was with *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). Reverting to his fascination with nostalgia, time, and place, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is a tale of memory and the effect of time on human interactions. He continuously shifted narrative modalities to move seamlessly between past, present, and future. By utilizing this type of editing, one in which objectivity and subjectivity are never clearly distinguishable, Resnais gained great commercial success and won the International Critics' Prize at Cannes in 1959.<sup>24</sup>

With Resnais' entrance into the feature film arena, he became identified with the "New Wave"<sup>25</sup> French directors, including François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard.<sup>26</sup> Beginning in 1959, this "New Wave" genre was based on the Italian neo-realism or observational documentary. The neo-realists rejected attempts to evoke expression through extreme stylization or montage shots. Instead, they stressed narrative qualities in

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<sup>24</sup> Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film*, 474.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

tune with the photographic realism of the motion picture: a casual, unadorned view of everyday life and a meandering, coincidence-laden series of actions and events. Here was an important strand of narrative filmmaking that contributed to the continuing development of documentary films.<sup>27</sup> Resnais' contribution to this genre was his focus on the unique language of the script.

Unlike "New Wave" directors who did not use scripts, Resnais worked from original scripts, written especially for the screen by major French and European novelists like Jean Cayrol (*Nuit et brouillard* and *Muriel, ou le temps d'un retour*), Marguerite Duras (*Hiroshima Mon Amour*), Alain Robbe-Grillet (*L'année dernière à Marienbad*), and Jorge Semprum (*La guerre est finie* and *L'affaire Stravinsky*). This focus on literature as the basis for aesthetic representation and movement reverted back to his earlier beliefs from Proust that literature was the source of purging pathos, and that films were not improvisations or automatic cinema. Resnais felt cinema represented "images that are intimately bound up with the sort of linguistic play characteristic of poetic texts."<sup>28</sup>

Resnais' style was preoccupied with the social and political order of his scripts. His films were philosophical investigations into the workings of the human mind and the paradoxical personalities of his figures.<sup>29</sup> The films were constructed to fit his belief that in creating specific imagery, the director creates a visual, spatial, and auditory space.

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<sup>27</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 92.

<sup>28</sup> Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film*, 151.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

Resnais once stated: “When I begin to think about the characters, I see them a little like marionettes, I have the intention of directing them in their little boxes, like in a Guignol theatre-a tragic theater.”<sup>30</sup>

Drawing from his early foundations of Proustian nostalgia, and memory, as well as the Surrealist philosophy on creative evolution, Resnais acquired a very personal lyricism with a unique style that focused on the theory of “memory-images.”<sup>31</sup> By manipulating the images he projected on the screen, Resnais played upon the innocence of his audience like a “tragic” puppet-master. His most famous documentary *Nuit et brouillard* reflects these nuanced techniques and visual effects.

In his film, Resnais created a specific montage style of imagery and presented the grave events of Nazi Genocide in both black-and-white and color film. He utilized this shift of color and darkness to produce something revolutionary and deeply meaningful. His was the first documentary film to deal with the immediacy of memory and the Holocaust, and it deeply explored the representation of historical events on film.

### *The Documentary*

The most famous “New Wave” French director François Truffaut once stated:

The effective war film is often the one in which the action begins after the war, when there is nothing but ruins and desolation everywhere: Rossellini’s *Germany Year Zero* (1947) and, above all, Alain Resnais’ *Nuit et brouillard*, the greatest film ever made.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.nezumi.dumousseau.free.fr/resnais/bio.html>. July 15, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Lopate, *Nuit et brouillard*, preface to Alain Resnais’ *Nuit et brouillard* (The Criterion Collection, 2003).

Focusing on “nothing but ruins and desolation everywhere” is precisely the power of Alain Resnais’ masterpiece *Nuit et brouillard*. In 1955, ten years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Alain Resnais returned there, to the barren, dilapidated landscape to capture what remained of the camp. Commissioned to make the film by the Comité d’histoire de la Deuxieme Guerre mondiale to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the camps’ liberation, Resnais recorded, in color, the landscapes that remained. What he discovered was that the color images of simple, pastoral settings could be powerfully juxtaposed to the actual black-and-white archival footage of the events that had taken place there when the camp was in active use. The result was something deeply moving and haunting, a documentary film made on the aesthetically, ethically, and previously unapproachable subject in France, the Holocaust. It is also one of the first documentary films to use the technological juxtaposition of color montages to black-and-white footage.

There is deep meaning behind the title of Resnais’ *Nuit et brouillard*. Taken literally, the “night” refers to the darkness under which the deportees arrived, but it can also refer to the certain death that awaited the condemned and the secrecy of the horrors they witnessed. The “fog” is a shroud that hides the ultimate fate of some deportees. This ambiguity of what happened during the Holocaust allowed for the world to claim ignorance and relinquish responsibility. It is also clear from an account of two women looking back on their nightmare at Ravensbruck that prisoners classified ‘N.N.’ were often kept in the dark as to what their “Nacht und Nebel” designation actually meant:

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We were classified NN: Nacht und Nebel. The literal translation is “Night and Fog,” and this signified that we were separate from the world, that we were different from the living. We never knew our fate; the Gestapo took that secret with them to their graves.<sup>33</sup>

The deportees and the world alike were purposely kept in the dark about the actual function of the death camps, and the workings were shrouded in deceit. In the aftermath of the war, “night and fog” came to stand for the nightmare suffered by everyone who had been deported by the Nazis, whether on the basis of ethnic background, political conviction, or resistance activities. In fact, this title refers as much to Resnais’ documentary as to the tragedy it depicts and to the title of Jean Cayrol’s *Poemes de la nuit et du brouillard*, published shortly after his return from Mauthausen, where he was interned under Himmler’s 1941 decree of “night and fog.”<sup>34</sup> A witness to the horrors of the Holocaust, as a resistance fighter and survivor, Jean Cayrol wrote the script for *Nuit et brouillard*.

This title can also stand for the black-and-white images Resnais cuts and splices with color footage of the camp. The night and fog are the black-and-white images of camp victims, Nazi officers, and camp architecture. The color images are removed from this shroud of darkness and feature aspects of renewal and remembrance. Suddenly, the outcome of these horrors are viewed in the nuanced color scheme of the human eye, instead of the simplistic, emotionless, dualistic black-and-white still frame shots.

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<sup>33</sup> Terrance Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 35.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard: On the Making, Reception, and Functions of a Major Documentary Film* (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1987), 22.

By tackling a subject with wounds still fresh, Cayrol did not presume that he was speaking for all survivors. He knowingly states:

What horrors have these silent grounds witnessed? The blood has dried, the tongues are silent. The blocks are visited only by a camera. Weeds have grown where the prisoners used to walk. No footstep is heard but our own.<sup>35</sup>

In these moments of deep reflection, Resnais projects his own interpretation of the Holocaust by constructing an artistic tableau. He fuses the words “no footstep is heard but our own” with imagery from the remnants of extermination camps which stand empty and silent. The words “the blood has dried, the tongues are silent,” are matched with shots of dilapidated barracks and wooden bunks devoid of human skeletons. Grassy fields overgrown with flowering weeds are shown as the narrator utters that “weeds have grown where prisoners used to walk.” In these images the rigidity of death is in opposition to the measured step of the contemporary investigator.<sup>36</sup>

Resnais is effective in establishing not only a narrative voice over, but a narrative theme of images on film. By transposing Nazi footage with liberation footage, he creates a vantage point where the director and viewer share in the same spatial, visual, and auditory space. Each audience member stares into the black and white images of Nazi soldiers marching and experiences feelings of fear and loss. Each person gazes at the barbed wire nailed to high wooden posts and notices its severed limpness with silence and sadness.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Roy Ames, *The Cinema of Alain Resnais* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1968), 49.



The score, created for the film by Hans Eisler, is employed by Resnais to emphasize the collision of imagery and sound. Eisler, a Jewish composer who escaped Nazi Germany during the war, transposes a musical arrangement in a thin and ethereal manner so as to create visual rhythm amongst the editing of pictures and the shift in narrative perspectives. Resnais juxtaposes shots of emaciated corpses and dried human flesh and ashes with the sound of fragile flute and string passages. At other moments the music mimics the physical movement of a train, Nazi soldiers marching, or the emaciated victims staring at the camera. Each time, the supporting lyricism, juxtaposed with the imagery, creates a softer, almost distancing effect for the viewer. The result is a film that is effective in its disjointed art and its transcendence to the horrors of death.

By constructing his montages from color shots of the derelict remains of Auschwitz and the black-and-white archival footage, Resnais edits the horrific imagery of bodies being bulldozed, experimental victims' oozing wounds, piles of women's hair, and decapitated corpses into a thirty-one-minute piece. Resnais displays technical mastery of the documentary medium, which enables him to manipulate the space-time continuum. He does not re-create the past for the viewers; on the contrary, he subtly tips them off to what occurred with clues that are still present when he pairs the footage of the gas chamber, showing scratches on the concrete walls, with the narrative: "The only sign, but you have to know, is the ceiling, dug into by fingernails. Even the concrete was torn. But you have to know."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Resnais rejects the objective neutrality often found in documentary films with his use of Cayrol's script and the narrator Michel Bouquet, whose tone throughout the film is filled with skepticism and doubt. There is a sympathetic awareness of the viewer's resistance, conscious or unconscious, to grasping the unthinkable.<sup>38</sup> The dialectic is established between the necessity of remembering, and the impossibility of doing so: "No description, no picture can reveal their true dimension." And: "Is it in vain that we try to remember?"<sup>39</sup>

Because he was a victim, Cayrol writes with a pious sentimentality that reflects his experiences and intimate knowledge of the horrors that occurred during the Holocaust. Since the goal of the film was to focus on the collective memory of France after the war, the statement, "but you have to know," is used as a form of closure, encouraging reflection and testimony about the reality of Nazi deportation and mass murder, genocide. This line, "you have to know," is then followed by the unprocessed shots of the gas chamber, accentuating the audience's collective experience and unfinished mourning for the victims through the imagery of death and destruction.

Near the end of the film, Resnais moves the audience from silent complicity and engages them in a dialogue in an attempt to make them face their guilty consciences. Through a sequence of shots from the war crime trials, Resnais shows the perpetrators standing up and silently mouthing the words he adds for them: "I am not responsible,

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<sup>38</sup> Lopate, *Nuit et brouillard*, 129.

<sup>39</sup> Alain Resnais, *Nuit et brouillard* (Paris: Argos Film, 1956).

says the kapo. I am not responsible, says the officer.” Then Resnais shifts the collective statement of “I am not responsible” to the audience and asks: “Then who is responsible?”<sup>40</sup> This question, followed by the still framed shots of cadavers in a mass grave, suddenly forces the bystander, or audience member, to come up with an answer.

This answer is given in the last shots of the movie where the audience is again placed at Auschwitz in 1955. The color of the film is muted at first as the shot travels over a dark pond. The voiceover states:

As I speak to you now, the icy water of the ponds and ruins fills the hollows of the mass graves, a frigid and muddy water, as murky as our memory. War nods off to sleep, but always keeps one eye open. Who among us keeps watch from this strange watch tower to warn of the arrival or our new executioners? Are their faces really different from our own?<sup>41</sup>

The reference to the mass graves from the previous shot, compounded with the reference to the “murky memory” of the audience, is Resnais’ subtle reminder that those responsible sit amongst them. Even though war has nodded off to “sleep,” Resnais warns that it always keeps “one eye open,” keeping watch over those who are somewhere in the midst of the society, those whose faces are not really “different from our own.” In fact, in Resnais’ opinion, the faces are those of the French, those of the post-Vichy society who pretended to take hope again and acted as if they were cured once and for all from the “scourge of the camps.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

The final words of Cayrol's script, that "we pretend it all happened only once at a given time and place. We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity's never-ending cry,"<sup>43</sup> truly reflect Resnais' desire to create a collective memory of the Holocaust in France because they focus on the "deaf ear" de Gaulle and his government turned to the memory of the Holocaust and the "never-ending cry" of the French people who wanted to "bury the corpse," as Simone de Beauvoir stated, of the "old monster that lay crushed beneath the rubble," the monster of inhumanity, murder, and trauma.

#### *The Public's Reaction: The Cannes Film Festival 1956*

With the completion of *Nuit et brouillard* in December 1955-January 1956, the film was sent to a board of censors in Paris. In an attempt to shield the sensitive eyes of the viewers, the censors insisted that the shot of the cadavers at the end of the film be cut. Also, in an attempt to protect the French military from charges of participation in the detention and deportation of the Jews in France, a shot of an army officer on duty at the Pithiviers concentration camp, whose kepi unmistakably indicated his French nationality, was also to be cut from the final version of the film. Alain Resnais refused. A debate ensued between the producers and censors until a compromise was found: The cadavers could stay, but the shot of the soldier would have a wooden beam superimposed over the kepi, thereby obscuring the officer's nationality. Therefore, it was with this "visa de

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

contrôlé,” that the film was finally granted a pass and shown in its original sequence.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, the goal of Resnais to strike a chord in the collective consciousness of France was achieved when the censors chose to edit his most accusatory shots.

In January of 1956 *Nuit et brouillard* was shown to a group of critics at the Musée de l’Homme where it was widely accepted by voters and received the Prix Jean Vigo. With the acclaim of this award, the film finally received attention from the French public. *Le Monde* described the film as “sobering and extremely emotional.”<sup>45</sup> With this positive note from the critics, Alain Resnais’ film was unanimously chosen to appear in the short subject category at the Cannes film festival in March of 1956.

However, on the day before the film was to be screened, the French received a request by the West German ambassador to hold off the screening due to an objection. Shortly thereafter, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Christian Pineau, received a letter from the West German Embassy requesting that the film be withdrawn from the French selection at Cannes.<sup>46</sup>

We simply do not believe that the International Film Festival at Cannes is the adequate forum for this piece, because the Festival should maintain positive relationships amongst its participants. This piece changes the ambiance of the Festival and suggests prejudice against the German Federal Republic. The normal spectator will be unable to distinguish between the criminal Nazi regime and the Germany of today.<sup>47</sup>

In this letter, the request for *Nuit et brouillard* to be omitted from the festival was based around the perception that the “normal spectator” would interpret the film and its Nazi

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<sup>44</sup> Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard: On Making, Receptions, and Functions of a Major Documentary Film*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> *Le Monde* (Paris), February 1, 1956.

<sup>46</sup> Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard: On the Making, Receptions, and Functions of a Major Documentary Film*, 35.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

criminals as a reflection of the current population in West Germany. The embassy felt that no distinction between the two would be visible and therefore found the film offensive to their national sensibilities because it might rekindle hatred for the German people.

Backing up this demand to take the film out of the Cannes Film Festival was Article 5 in the festival regulations. This article stipulated that if a film was deemed offensive, a country could request that the film be withdrawn from the competition, though compliance with the request was not obligatory.<sup>48</sup> When Resnais heard about this possible block to his film, he decided to meet with the Comité d'Action de la Résistance in an attempt to have them keep the film in the festival. The response by this committee was to uphold the German request and “in accordance with the Minister of Foreign Affairs” the film was removed from the festival.<sup>49</sup> *Nuit et brouillard* was replaced by a film entitled *Nuits Royales*, which was about a spectacle at a French chateau. It had not received a single vote within the selection committee.<sup>50</sup>

In light of this rejection by the festival committee, as well as the lack of support by a committee representing the Resistance and the freedom of expression in France, a subsequent counter-protest in support of the film appeared in the French press. This protest was vehemently supported by the film's author, Jean Cayrol, in a letter to *Le Monde* which was published in April 1956:

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

It was a searing film in which the pitiless images would have made any Sergeant or police officer blush in shame. It tells a story that implicates not only the German Fatherland and the Nazis, but also our country because we weren't forced to modestly avert our gaze from a drama that had contaminated us all. Thus, France is refusing to be the France of truth, because it is only in the anonymity of memory that we are able to accept the biggest butchery of all times.<sup>51</sup>

Calling this film one that burns the images into the viewer's minds regardless of their nationality, Cayrol refused to believe that the rejection of the film was solely based on the German Embassy's letter. Instead, he believed that the French were hiding their eyes behind the drama of war that "contaminated us all." The collective "us" for Cayrol includes both the Germans and the French, and he stated that France would cease to be France if its people did not accept this film into their own memory.

Another protest came from the victims of the deportations who wanted the film to be shown as a reminder of the atrocities they faced. Outraged that they were once again being ignored, as in the Liberation ceremonies of 1944-1946, these members shared their sadness and anger with the press and wrote in *La Croix*:

This constitutes an act of accusation against the Nazi atrocities that the French, particularly the young, must know so as to never to repeat them in the future. It is intolerable that they removed this film, as the newspapers reported, due to a request by the German Embassy in Bonn. We must unite together to fight for the memory of the deportations, the internment of families, and their deaths, to make sure there is never a rebirth of Nazism or German militarism. This will safeguard our liberties, our security, and the country of France.<sup>52</sup>

Protesting this omission of the film as "intolerable" and unjust, this group wanted the people of France, especially "the young," to see the horrors portrayed in the film so as

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<sup>51</sup> "Nuit et brouillard écarté du festival de Cannes. Une protestation de Jean Cayrol," *Le Monde* (Paris), April 11, 1956.

<sup>52</sup> "Nuit et brouillard est écarté de la sélection française par décision ministérielle. Déportés et cinéastes protestant," *La Croix* April 15, 1956.

not to repeat them some day soon. The victims called upon all those who had suffered deportation, internment, or experienced the disappearance of family members to join together and fight the festival to restore the film to the line-up. Their goal was to memorialize their dead and protect the security of their place within French society. These protests, while heard by the festival committee, did not reverse the outcome of their initial decision to remove the film from the Cannes International Film Festival of 1956. The film was barred from the competition. The committee did make one concession to the protesters' demands however, and allowed the film to play at the Palais du festival under official government sponsorship in connection with the commemorative Journée Nationale de Déportés, held on April 29, 1956.<sup>53</sup>

Years later, when interviewed in 1986, Alain Resnais recounted that the committee simply told him: "No we will not show this film because it is too political."<sup>54</sup> As Resnais recalls, the committee found the film too "indecent" to show to an international crowd. What Resnais postulates, however, is that the political contestation of his film was not in its commemoration of the Holocaust, but in its warning to the future, which to the collective French imagination of 1956 was Algeria. Resnais states:

Really, in France at that time we were in a war with Algeria. The war had reached France and there were already regroupment zones and camps in the center of the country.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard: On the Making, Receptions, and Functions of a Major Documentary Film*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



This perspective that “Auschwitz was not a pressing issue for the French before the atrocities of the Algerian war began their course,” as Dominick LaCapra states, allowed *Nuit et brouillard* to be seen as a response to the present as much as the past.<sup>56</sup> In this sense, *Nuit et brouillard* was a film about France as much as Germany. The film was about a France that was under occupation, a France in a brutal colonial war, and a France that censored the memory of trauma for its citizens.

It is perhaps because of this commemoration and warning that Resnais’ film was considered ahead of its time. As François Truffaut notes:

*Nuit et brouillard* is a sublime film about which it is difficult to speak. Any adjective, any aesthetic judgment would be out of place in speaking of this work, which is not an “indictment” or a “poem” but a “meditation” on the deportation. The film’s impact lies entirely in the tone adopted by the filmmakers: a terrifying mildness. You leave the theater feeling “devastated” and not very happy with yourself.<sup>57</sup>

Because Resnais chooses to show the murdered, their flesh once living now dead, now eerily animated as we watch, he is disturbingly true to the aesthetic and material interest in objects, fabric and human matter he displays. He offers this “meditation” and testimony to fleshly, emotional suffering in *Nuit et brouillard* as a way to imprint the Holocaust in the collective imagination and in individual lives so that the viewers are “devastated” and unhappy with themselves. The lasting impact of the film was that it did redirect the thoughts and feelings of some French during the post-Vichy period. Most

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<sup>56</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998) as cited in Emily Tomlinson *Torture, Fiction, and the Repetition of Horror: Ghost-writing the Past in Algeria and Argentina* (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2002), 44.

<sup>57</sup> François Truffaut, *Les Films de ma vie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), quoted by Annette Insdorf, *L’Holocaust à l’écran* (Paris: CinémaAction/Cerf, 1985), 43.

importantly it opened up the memory of the French, and allowed the society to deal with their guilt over World War II in the cinema of the 1960s-1980s.

### CHAPTER 3

#### FRANCE'S SHIFT IN CONSCIOUSNESS: THE REVIVAL OF WORLD WAR II IN FILM FROM 1970-1986

In recent years criticism has come over *Nuit et brouillard*'s inadequate treatment of the Holocaust as a Jewish experience. While Resnais did focus on the deportation of resistance fighters and political prisoners, critics say he did not focus on the Jews in the Holocaust, only making a glancing reference to the Jews with the line "Stern, a Jewish student from Amsterdam." The reason for this omission however, was that the Holocaust was a largely taboo subject during the post-Vichy period. Due to the highly discreet way that the French dealt with the topic of World War II between 1947-1958, there were very few films produced about war themes. The image of deportation was believed to be too historically realistic and was tackled by few filmmakers until *Nuit et brouillard* was released in 1956. Regarded by the Cannes Film Festival as too isolated and too far ahead of its time, Resnais' film was a rare entity that opened up a dialogue in French society and acted as a stimulus to reawaken the subject of World War II, the Occupation, and the Holocaust.

The years 1958-1962 witnessed this reawakening of French imagination and memory with thirty films being made about the antihero, or the most un-Gaullist figure in France, the prisoner of war. A few examples of these films are: Andre Cayatte's *Le Passage du Rhin* (1959), Jean Renoir's *Le Caporal épinglé* (1962), and Alex Joffe's *Les Culottes rouges* (1962). Only a few films were brave enough to explore more shadowy subjects whose characters stood in closer proximity to the French public of World War II

than de Gaulle's Resistance fighter. A film to note is Yves Robert's *La Guerre des boutons*, which came out after *Nuit et brouillard* in 1961. The film was based on a novel by Louis Pergaud and is a child's fable about the rivalry between two villages during a civil war in France. Transposed into postwar France, the political and racial nature of this story becomes clear. Pergaud's text focuses on the differences of two towns: "For the people of Velrans were churchgoers, while those of Longeverne were reds."<sup>1</sup> In the film, the general resembles a partisan chief, while the traitor is the very image of a man who would denounce his neighbor and ends up being a victim of a brutal purge by the enemy. This film embodies France's internal struggles during the Vichy period and is the first screen treatment of collaboration and betrayal.<sup>2</sup> The director suggests that the people of Velrans are the French and those of Longeverne are the Jews who are given up, betrayed to die.

### *Modifying the Memory of Vichy: The Spirit of May 1968*

At least according to legend, the "events of May," the strikes and disturbances that convulsed France in the spring of 1968, began at the movies. On February 9, 1968, Henri Langlois, president of the National Cinémathèque Française in Paris and a shambling, revered godfather of the French New Wave, was removed from his post by André Malraux, the minister of culture in Charles de Gaulle's government. Young

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Pergaud, *La Guerre des boutons* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1963), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Rouso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 230-231.

cinephiles reacted with outrage, and their angry protests flowed into a tide of political and social discontent that quickly reached the flood stage.

Three months later the country was engulfed in riots, work stoppages and mass demonstrations. Some of France's most venerable traditions and institutions seemed to be under assault, and the Cannes Film Festival, the nation's glamorous and exalted cinematic rite of spring, was hardly immune. The festival came to a halt on May 19, after a group of filmmakers, including Jean-Luc Goddard and François Truffaut, professing solidarity with insurgent students and workers, rushed the stage at the Palais des Festivals and held down the curtain, preventing the scheduled screening from taking place. To an extent rarely matched before or since, filmmakers did not simply record the upheavals and crises of the time; they were participants and catalysts.<sup>3</sup>

This movement of students and workers that erupted in Paris in May 1968 was not a movement primarily designed to win material benefits. Naturally there were underlying demands involving the standard of living which found an opportunity to come to the surface during the fervor of insurrection, but these demands failed to explain how the outbreak of revolt quickly and naturally spread from the students to the workers. This was not a "socialist" movement, as the term is traditionally applied to Eastern Europe, and it did not demand the installation of a "people's democracy." What it dared to question was not the legitimacy of property, which was treated as a secondary problem, but, above all, power and authority. It made no attempt to seize the means of production,

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<sup>3</sup> A.O. Scott, "The Spirit of '68: What Goddard and His Fellow Revolutionaries Still Have to Tell Us" *The New York Times* (April 27, 2008): 1.

but rather the centers of command. Everything took place as if those involved understood that the crucial issue of the battle was not property but power.<sup>4</sup>

Above all, the movement questioned the authority of President Charles de Gaulle and as Pierre Mendès-France noted, “dramatized the determination of millions of Frenchmen to no longer be considered impotent subjects in a harsh, inhumane, conservative society.”<sup>5</sup> The revolts demanded that de Gaulle acknowledge individuality and people’s freedom to perform their roles in a society that was their own. In all respects, 1968 challenged the hegemony of 1945.<sup>6</sup> The demand for self-determination across French society was wide spread and, during the sudden stoppage of work in May of 1968, there was a kind of silent meditation in which ordinary men and young people came to the decision that their leaders had failed them.<sup>7</sup>

In its distinctiveness, the French student and worker revolts of 1968 were linked to the crisis of the French state, whose democratic arrangements under de Gaulle were among the West’s least functional. The new consumer capitalism of the 1950s became linked in public minds to acquisitive individualism and privatized lifestyle. Students rebelled against the perceived logic of modernization, against the “politico-economic power’s entire depersonalized, ‘rationalized,’ bureaucratic plan of action.” Such logic seemed continuous across industry, education, and personal life: from de-skilling and

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<sup>4</sup> J.J. Servan-Schreiber, *Le Reveil de la France* (Paris: Editions Denoel, 1968), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>6</sup> Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 353.

<sup>7</sup> Servan-Schreiber, *Le Reveil de la France*, 32.

automation, to machine-like preparation for a circumscribed role in a big organization and everyday fragmentation and isolation. Thus, if the positive program of 1968 seemed a highly rhetorical and abstract desire for wholeness, liberation, and the reclaiming of an integrated self, it was in the multiple settings of everyday life, workplace, school, lecture hall and exam room, shopping center, car, television, family, bedroom, the generalized imaginative space of commodification and mass-mediated culture, that this became compellingly concrete. Politics were coming down to the ground and people wanted to be in charge of their own lives.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, the period that followed *Nuit et Brouillard* and the films of the 1960s can be seen as a revival of the World War II memory in France because suddenly the Gaullist ideals of the immediate postwar period had been shattered by the revolts of '68. Subsequently, French society began to hold a mirror up to their role in the Occupation and dismissed parts of the Resistance as myth. Henry Rousso states that:

It is the nature of most groups to formulate their views of the past and to interpret their history and invest it with meaning, sometimes deliberately and explicitly, at other times inadvertently and at random. It is impossible to state precisely what the collective memory of an event is, but when dealing with the French memory from 1970-1980 people were obsessed with the memory of Vichy and the Occupation: that much is a fact.<sup>9</sup>

This obsession with the memory of Vichy, compounded with the release of *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in 1971, began the new phase in France where more than forty-five films were made about the prosecutors of Vichy, collaboration, and Nazism. The society began to feel the aftershocks of the 1940s.

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<sup>8</sup> Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 352.

<sup>9</sup> Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 272.

The first of these films to expose this aftershock and become a counter-myth to the official Gaullist myth was *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1971) by Marcel Ophuls. The title of this film was taken from a comment made by the pharmacist in the film, and is ironic because, while the film did provoke the emotions of shame, surprise, disbelief, and sorrow in France, it did not create a retrospective pity. The reason this sorrow was pitiless is that the French were unable to decipher to whom this pity should be directed.

Straying away from the epic filmmaking of the 1960s, Ophuls chose to use documentary film as a medium to show the daily life in Clermont-Ferrand, depicted as a typical French city under the Occupation. Through the use of eyewitness accounts by a range of citizens, each character becomes an actor in this drama, representing Pétainists, collaborators, resistance fighters, and prominent leaders who stiffly protest that their consciences are clear.<sup>10</sup>

The creative and artistic nature of this film established its success and contributed to its becoming a model for the use of eyewitness accounts in documentary filmmaking. For the first time with this film, Ophuls gave eyewitness testimony precedence over archival footage. Only 17 percent of the four and a half hour film is taken from French newsreels and German propaganda. The remaining time is filled with the interviews of witnesses in emotionally charged surroundings: Christian de la Mazière, former member of the Waffen SS and the French collaborationist Charlemagne Division, is interviewed in Sigmaringen, the Mecca of collaborators in exile; René de Chambrun, Laval's son-in-

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 101.



law, is interviewed at Chateldon on Laval's own estate; Colonel du Jonchay of the army resistance organization is interviewed at Vichy.<sup>11</sup>

The emphasis placed on interviews above archival footage is no accident. Ophuls determined that the dramatic power of his film is dependent on the distance between the objective image of the event and the subjective account of the actors. The result is that each person's account is built upon the contradiction of two truths: that of the past and that of memory. In seeing the contrast between the past and memory, the spectator concludes that many interviewees, particularly the Pétainists, are liars. An example is, when Georges Lamirand is asked about the meaning of the National Revolution, he exclaims, "That's only a word!" The image of him in 1942 from the archives however, shows him addressing a crowd of young people beneath a portrait of Pétain, and immediately it takes on the character of an indictment.<sup>12</sup> In catching this witness in a lie, the credibility of his account is brought into question, removing all dignity from his character in the film.

One of the most important areas of amnesia discovered by the film is French anti-Semitism, which in Clermont-Ferrand owed nothing to the Nazis. When two teachers at the Lycée Blaise-Pascal try to evade questions about their Jewish colleagues, the Vichyite anti-Semitism is clear when they claim that "they all packed their bags and left. They went into exile." Here all persecution of the Jews is laid at the hands of the Nazis as the teachers claim, "let's be nuanced, we tried to get these people some work tutoring and so

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 102.

forth.”<sup>13</sup> The representation of anti-Semitism shown in this part of the film was crucial during the 1970s, since this time period witnessed a notable reawakening of Jewish consciousness. Up until that time in France this memory had been obliterated by official and unofficial policies which, as seen in this account, had deep roots in French tradition when speaking about the war. Similar to the case of Lamirand being caught in a lie, the distance between the actions of these teachers in the past and their memory of these actions in the present is very wide.

The controversy sparked by *Le Chagrin et la pitié* was largely over Ophul's choice of witnesses, and the credit or discredit each of their accounts is given in the film. Of the thirty-six interviewees, twenty-six are French, five are German, and five are English. Many who saw the film believed it was too focused on France and its domestic issues. The role played by the occupying forces was neglected. The second point of concern was that the testimony by prominent figures outweighed those by unknown locals. Of the figures representing the resistance, only Pierre Mendès-France, Jacques Duclos, Georges Bidault, and Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie are nationally known. The other seventeen men are average characters, breaking their silence and anonymity.

While Ophuls does dedicate a part of his film to the testimony of the non-resisting French, in particular one out-and-out Pétainist, Georges Lamirand; one Lavalian, René de Chambrun; one collaborationist, de la Mazière; and two personalities who, regardless of what they did or thought during the Occupation, are presented as an anti-Semite (the milliner) and a Pétainist (the hairdresser whose head was shaved at the time of the

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<sup>13</sup> Marcel Ophuls, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (Paris: Productions Télévision Rencontre S.A., 1971).

Liberation and who is the only woman in the film to testify as a participant in the events),<sup>14</sup> the list on the other side is much shorter, causing critics to question the balance of the film.

Ophuls answered his critics by stating that if they examined the film as a whole, including the archival footage, they would find that:

Twenty percent of the film is devoted to describing the Resistance, 20 percent to the collaboration and to Vichy politics and propaganda, and 55 percent does not refer directly to either.<sup>15</sup>

Coming to a somewhat different conclusion than the critics, Ophuls believed that more than half of his film was non-partisan in its representation, showing the dramatic shift in the way that the Occupation could be interpreted by the audience. The film was a deliberate effort to demystify the reality of history and shed light onto shadowy areas that had been previously controlled by official government representations. The result was that the viewers were able to challenge the stories they heard because the stories were told in interviews, a familiar medium for the French public. *Le Chagrin et la pitié* was unique because it confronted the issue of how historical memory should be passed on.

After *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in 1972, another controversial film to tackle the matter that France had produced committed fascists during the war was Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). This film, which came out during a time of great intellectual stress and dissatisfaction, as shown by the revolts of May '68, proved to be in discord with the 'utopian' ideals of the period because Malle was unclear about how the audience

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<sup>14</sup> Rouso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 103.

<sup>15</sup> Marcel Ophuls, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (Paris: Alain Moreau, 1980), 207. This is the screenplay with an introduction by the director alone after his quarrel with the producers, a symptom of a success that none of them had anticipated.

should perceive good and evil.<sup>16</sup> Like the fog in Resnais' film, the main character, Lucien, is shrouded in ambiguity and the atmosphere in which he becomes an aide to the Gestapo is the most difficult to understand, and the hardest to excuse, because it is unmotivated by ideological misconception. Lucien ultimately joins the Gestapo not from political conviction, but from his penchant for fighting, his thirst for action, and his attraction to the violence in the air.<sup>17</sup>

Lucien was therefore a thought-provoking character, the hardest of the French collaborationists to excuse, because he was the embodiment of a French archetype that was all too well known. He was a man who was indifferent to the suffering of others.<sup>18</sup> By rediscovering the history of collaboration, Vichy, and Nazism, both films, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* and *Lacombe Lucien*, gave a more complex view of the war years in France, and they made it possible to show a more complete image of the past, without the political and racial mythologizing of previous films. As a result, the cinema started to focus again on the previously taboo subject: the Jews and the Holocaust.

While none of the films in the 1960s and 1970s dealt specifically with the imagery of the Holocaust as Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* did, they did deal with the French collective memory and guilt over collaboration. This reflection into the history and memory of France started by *Nuit et brouillard* in 1956, and continued with *Le*

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<sup>16</sup> Keith A. Reader, *Intellectuals and the Left in France Since 1968* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Rouso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

*Chagrin et la pitié* and *Lacombe Lucien* in the 1970s, made the topic of the war and the Occupation a constant point of reference to people of all generations in France.

This tide of familiarity with wartime topics began to give way to a more complex view in the 1980s, as seen with the momentousness of the Claus Barbie trial in May 1987. Seen as a symbolic event, Claus Barbie's arrival in France reflected the deep wishes of the government to shape collective memory and eradicate the turbulent currents of the post-Vichy syndrome. Barbie was depicted by the French as a symbol of Nazi barbarism: the man who tortured Jean Moulin and who would be judged in the name of the law and with the impossibility of forgetting the past. Because justice would play the leading role in his trial, there would be no hint of partisan politics or state self-glorification, declared by Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy:

In taking the decision to try Klaus Barbie, the French government was not acting out of a spirit of vengeance. Its concerns were two: first, to enable French justice to do its work, and second, to honor the memory of that time of grieving and struggle by which France preserved her honor. French men and women must not forget this history, which is theirs. Members of the younger generation must know what was then endured so that they will always be ready to defend the dignity of their fatherland and, still more, the dignity of man.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously the government wanted to create and contain the memories of World War II within the predefined and structured category of this trial. In this way they could calm the passions in the country and remind society of the trauma of war and its need to be obsessed with the past. With this new emphasis placed on memory in France, it was now possible for filmmakers to show a more complete image of the past. As a result, the cinema ceased to be the great violator of taboos and certain films indicated a significant

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 201.

evolution in the popular ideas and attitudes in France. Films also began to focus on the Holocaust.

One form of evolution to occur in the historical and educational filmmaking of the 1980s was that of the documentary. Utilizing the same technique of questioning and witness testimonials as *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, the film *Shoah* (1986) by Claude Lanzmann was epic in its eleven years of research, creation, final release, and its focus on genocide as a historical phenomenon that affected survival in the present. It led to a density of images in the minds of survivors and spectators alike. The force of *Shoah* is that Lanzmann claims complete subjectivity; he gives voice to the people who felt they were being excluded from the history of post-Vichy France.<sup>20</sup> A look at this film is incomplete without taking into consideration the philosophy of existentialism, upon which the subjectivity of this film was constructed.

### *Existentialism and Remembrance*

Returning again to the events of May '68, a pivotal outcome, if not the founding moment in their intellectual and political trajectories, was the resurgence of the philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and Maurice Blanchot, who found themselves assuming the task of posing questions, not at the level of their own social interests, but at the level of society itself, in its entirety. This relationship of the intellectual as professional spokesperson for suffering created a new aura around the physical image of the intellectual.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>21</sup> Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 168.

In the unrest that took place in May '68, workers' demands were not always limited to mere economic gains, but began to veer toward a questioning of the model of production, the power structure of the unions, and beyond that, the model of Gaullist society itself. At the same time, student activists experimented with Sartre's idea of "expanding the field of the possible" by utilizing direct action against that which they felt was unfair in society.<sup>22</sup> The idea that the government and the individual needed to be transparent and open to the world around them, while at the same time being held accountable for their actions, led to the revival of Jean-Paul Sartre's teachings on existentialism in France.

Dubbed the "New Philosopher" movement, the emergence of philosophers like Sartre amounted to a perverse and distorted reprise of the *gauchiste* dream by uniting the voice of the intellectual to the speech of the people. The intellectual could offer something abstract statistics and dry analyses could not show: the representation of the individual victim of human suffering. For the New Philosophers, the figure of the suffering individual could then be mobilized to show the primacy of the ethical or moral dimension over the political, the superiority of insight over cognition, as well as the superior value of aesthetic modes of representation over scientism or rationality of the social sciences.<sup>23</sup>

By restoring intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre to a place of prestige in the society, the "New Philosophers" began to reassume a specific and autonomous role by lending

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<sup>22</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Sartre par Sartre," in *Situations IX* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 127.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, 171.

their notoriety as intellectuals to protect and further various causes, including organizing against police repressions, publicizing the cause of militants on trial, supporting immigrants, and investigating prison conditions. Another focus of this intellectual authority was that the philosopher became the maker of history and the seismologist of the future. For Sartre, this meant that his previous role as a champion for freedom against domination was re-instated and the individual's role within society was again brought into question.

According to Sartre, the existence of man precedes essence, which means that subjectivity is the starting point from which man is defined. To put this more specifically, it means that:

First of all man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards defines himself. A man, as an existentialist conceives him is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust towards existence.<sup>24</sup>

An existentialist's first move is to make the full responsibility of a man's existence rest on him. That means that he is responsible for his own individuality and for all men. One man's action involves all humanity. The man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but who is at the same time choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot help escape the feeling of his total and deep

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New Jersey: Secaucus, 1956), 15.



responsibility. A man is responsible for his passion and therefore creates his essence. Man is therefore the future of man.<sup>25</sup>

Since man is “nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of acts, nothing else than his life.”<sup>26</sup> In the situation of war, Sartre believes that the worst tortures do not create a non-human state. The reason for this is that decisions are human, and those who make them carry the responsibility for them. This means that if a man is mobilized by war, that war is his war. If this man does not abstain from fighting, this man has chosen to engage himself in it.

Existential psychoanalysis seeks to determine the original choice made by this man and the fundamental attitude, which cannot be expressed by simple, logical definitions because it is prior to all logic. Therefore, the choice and the position made by this man requires reconstruction based on objective, documentary evidence as well as the testimony of others, since man is a totality and not a collection. Consequently he expresses himself as a whole in even his most insignificant and his most superficial behavior. In other words, there is not a taste, a mannerism, or a human act which is not revealing of that man’s existence.<sup>27</sup>

For Claude Lanzmann, this existential philosophy meant that he fulfilled his existence in the world through his actions of filmmaking. Because *Shoah* shows the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 68.

specific mannerisms and human acts made by the perpetrators, bystanders, and victims in their testimonials, it also reveals their existence because it engages them in making a decision about their actions during the Holocaust. The film equally engages and challenges the viewers to take responsibility for their interpretations which are destined to bring to light, in a strictly objective form, the subjective choice by which each living person makes himself a person, that is, makes known to himself what he is.

## CHAPTER 4

### CLAUDE LANZMANN and *SHOAH*

In Simone de Beauvoir's preface to Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985), she states that "in spite of everything we know, the ghastly experience [of the Holocaust] remained remote from us. Now, for the first time, we live it in our minds, hearts, and flesh. It becomes our experience."<sup>1</sup> The inventiveness of Lanzmann's film is his use of probing to present the Holocaust.

He achieves this philosophical probing by focusing on the places, voices, and faces of the Holocaust. In ferreting out the horrible realities hidden beneath the camouflage of the forests and fresh grass, he shows the sites of extermination in their present-day form. Unlike Resnais in 1956 and Ophuls in 1971, Lanzmann uses no archival footage. During most of the film, the voices of the people he questions tell us the same realities of gas chambers and extermination procedures. The faces of the Polish peasants, survivors, and perpetrators show the same indifferent, ironic, and even satisfied expressions thirty years after the events of the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup>

Understandably, as de Beauvoir explains, a ritualized nature surrounds this film because while watching the film, the viewer finds that his or her own experience blends with the memory and trauma of the victim. The mind, heart, and flesh can react to the past and the present at the same level. The asceticism created by this juxtaposing time and Lanzmann's use of circularly structured testimonials symbolizes what he calls a

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<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, "La Mémoire de l'horreur," preface to Claude Lanzmann's, *Shoah* (Paris: Fayard, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“fiction of the real,” in which his personal interpretation of the event and his vision of the film as a work of art incite criticism.<sup>3</sup> This somewhat problematic realization that his film is at the same time reality and fiction makes it important to separate the film from Lanzmann’s ideologies and subject it to analysis. To do so, one must understand Lanzmann’s background and the influences which helped form his ideologies.

Just three years Alain Resnais’ junior, Claude Lanzmann was born in Paris, France, on November 27, 1925. While sharing in the same generational and post-war culture as Resnais, Lanzmann differed in his educational and philosophical experiences. While Resnais filled his education with the study of Proust, Surrealism, and the development of “New Wave” cinema, Claude Lanzmann dedicated himself to the study of philosophy. As a scholar at the University of Tübingen in Germany, Lanzmann avidly studied such German phenomenological philosophers as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Lanzmann then returned to France and graduated with a diploma in philosophy from the Sorbonne.

Finishing his studies in the early 1950s, Lanzmann found himself in the middle of an important cultural, intellectual, and philosophical movement called existentialism. In 1952, at the age of twenty-seven, Lanzmann became a member of the elite existential circle with Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. Introduced to these visionaries by his sister, who was having an affair with Sartre, Lanzmann quickly became

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<sup>3</sup> Claude Lanzmann, “Seminar with Claude Lanzmann, 11 April 1990,” *Yale French Studies* no.79 (1991): 96-97.

influenced by these philosophers' concepts of humanity and its precarious situation within the world.<sup>4</sup>

Lanzmann moved on from his close friendship with these philosophers to become the lover of Simone de Beauvoir, a philosophical collaborator of Sartre, and the editor of his existentialist periodical *Les Temps Modernes*. During his time as editor, Lanzmann stayed true to Sartre's existentialist precept that ideas are products of man's experience in real life situations. There is an indifference to "things in themselves" or "being-in-itself" so everyone looks and perceives the world around him or her with filters based on his or her own experiences and prejudices.<sup>5</sup> When man looks around him, the world is full of situations imbued with meanings which bear the stamp of that person's existence.<sup>6</sup> Lanzmann believed that when one focuses on the individual, and uses him or her as a vehicle to relive the past, the present moment that is created is a window into that individual's past experience. This philosophy and the ability to make these individual experiences into an audience's collective experience, is at the core of Lanzmann's documentary films. Reliving the past through the experience of others results in an individualized memory or responsibility towards past events.

Starting his film career twenty-two years after Alain Resnais, Claude Lanzmann's first venture into documentary film was in 1972 with *Pourquoi Israel?* In this film, Lanzmann focuses on several interviews with Israelis. Lanzmann has these people speak about their daily lives and what they experience on that limited basis. The interesting

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<sup>4</sup>Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (London: Routledge, 2001), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

“stamp on their existence,” or the particular life experience they all share, is that they were once European Jews. The resulting situation is that their perception of reality and the world around them is created or shaped by their real life experiences from the past. By tracing and tracking their existence in the past, Lanzmann exposes how trauma guides their reactions in the present.

In his second documentary, *Shoah* (1985), Lanzmann focuses on his belief that images of the Holocaust are images without imagination. He therefore rejected archival footage or visual documentation of the events, and instead created images with the words spoken by his interviewees. He allowed the viewers to imagine and reconstruct the reality of the events in their own minds. About this philosophy Lanzmann states:

[details are] what reactivate things, what gives them to be seen, to be experienced, and the entire film, for me, is precisely the passage from the abstract to the concrete. This for me is the entire philosophical process.<sup>7</sup>

Touching on the existentialist credo that existence proceeds essence, Lanzmann believed that if we grant that we exist and fashion our image at one and the same time, the image is valid for everyone because the traumatic effects of reliving the past result in “self-rendering,” not working through it.<sup>8</sup> Thus the individual’s responsibility is much greater than we suppose because it involves all mankind.

In France, the re-writing of World War II history by the Gaullists, the emphasis on consumerism and modernization in the 1950s, the events of May ’68, and the resurgence of the existentialist movement, allowed Lanzmann to embark on his eleven-

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<sup>7</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1998), 132.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

year journey to make *Shoah*. This was a time when France was very different in its philosophical ideologies, cultural practices, and economy from the period when Alain Resnais made *Nuit et brouillard* in 1955. By the late 1970s and mid 1980s, when Lanzmann started his film, there had been a great deal of scholarship surrounding the Holocaust, and the themes of death, dying, and morality became closely tied to the conflicts in Israel during the 1960s and the emphasis on community and civil rights in France at the same time.

After *Shoah* in 1985, Lanzmann returned to Israel in 1994 to focus on the terror of war in his documentary *Tsahal*. Named after the Israeli Defense Forces, this film again focuses on the importance of interviews in which events are relayed in words. Controversial with the Gaullists in France because it focused on the reality of war, Lanzmann's film reveals the fear, disorientation, and violence of young soldiers in the army. The moment-to-moment struggle of these soldiers to kill and not be killed is captured in an interview with a young man who says: "You think neither of country nor flag nor of any great phases later written by historians."<sup>9</sup> Again, Lanzmann bases art and film around his deep rooted beliefs in existentialist philosophy. Borrowing from Jean-Paul Sartre's character Mathieu in *A Troubled Sleep*, Lanzmann shows how these men in *Tsahal* do not focus on the future outcomes of their actions because, as with Mathieu's "obliteration of all thought,"<sup>10</sup> the reality of encountering death and destruction every day

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Lennon, "Ghosts of Sobibor," *The Guardian*, 27 July 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Troubled Sleep* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1950), pp.123-124.

is shrouded in the fact that the action chosen by the character creates his existence. Man will be who he has chosen to be.

Continuing to explore this theme of confronting everyday reality and responsibility as a way to understand the past, Lanzmann's most recent film, *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4pm*, was made in 2001 and is told through the eyes of a single survivor, Yehuda Lerner. Cut from the original footage of *Shoah*, the testimony of Lerner centers around the mass revolt and escape in 1943 of the inmates at Sobibor, a death camp in Poland. This film is about the action and reaction of Jews in the carrying out of an intricate plan to escape destruction. Visually tied to his methods of lingering shots on quiet landscapes, close-frame shots on the survivor, and meditative shots of the decaying camp, Lanzmann makes these scenes quiet moments of reflection. As in *Shoah*, this film focuses on stirring the audiences' imagination by showing how museums (the remnants of camps) and testimony (the survivor) institute oblivion as well as remembrance.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Documentary: Survivors*

In the opening scene of *Shoah* a text scrolls by in which the following is stated:

Only two men survived Chelmno out of 400,000...Michael Podchlebnik and Simon Srebnik. The reason why [Simon] was kept alive was his melodious voice: Several times a week, when the rabbits kept in hutches by the SS needed fodder, young Srebnik rowed up the Narew, Chelmno's river, under guard, in a flat-bottomed boat, to the alfalfa fields at the edge of the village. He sang Polish folk tunes and in return the guard taught him Prussian military songs.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Lennon, "Ghosts of Sobibor," *The Guardian*, 27 July 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 2.



It is after this text, that the scene of a river appears, and the camera angle focuses on a boat traversing the waters of the Narew. The viewer sees a man silently moving his mouth and then the singing is heard as it slowly reaches its crescendo. This song is a native Polish ballad and the man who sings it is Simon Srebnik, now forty-seven years of age.<sup>13</sup> The frame closes in and shows the stoic lines on his face, and he becomes silent and reflective in his own space.

In this personal moment, where Srebnik's eyes scan the horizon, the viewer believes he is remembering his past and the emotions in his eyes are shown as the camera zooms in for a close-up. The reason why Lanzmann turns the camera to the probing of the victim's experience at that moment reflects the filmmakers' existential belief that everywhere one looks, situations become imbued with meaning by bearing the stamp of the individual. The way Srebnik perceives the world around him, the conscious experience of being back in Chelmno, is meaningful to his existence, and this experience is shared by the audience because, in Srebnik's most insignificant and superficial behavior, he reveals himself.

As seen with the boat scene on the river, Lanzmann uses the incarnation, the actual reliving of the past, particularly its traumatic suffering, in the present. When Lanzmann shifts his focus away from Srebnik's silent reactions, and plays the voice over commentary, the audience shares in Srebnik's feelings. The imagery of the pastoral scene is violently brought back to Srebnik's reality, that of Chelmno's horrors:

Yes. It was terrible. No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible? And no one can understand it. Even I, here, now..... I can't believe I'm

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<sup>13</sup> This is the age of Simon Srebnik in 1985.

here, No. I just can't believe it. It was always this peaceful here. Always. When they burned two thousand people-Jews every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now.<sup>14</sup>

This silence left by the Holocaust was described by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard as something that cannot be phrased in the conventional idioms and therefore remains out of reach for historians. This, he believed, was a result of the post-Vichy syndrome where the common person was unable to remember or comprehend the Final Solution with a rational explanation. Lyotard's presumption was that "silence" is the only outcome of Holocaust history, and his idea was that no historian could properly capture its void. Lanzmann's role as the *mise-en-scène* in the film, however, is pivotal to the audience's understanding of the Holocaust through their own experience. In his adherence to existentialism with his approach to this film, he controls the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Without recreating the events, he recreates a conscious experience for these witnesses and makes a meaningful experience for the audience, who can imagine the feelings of the man on screen. Lanzmann breaks this "silence" to probe at the existence of his characters.

Srebnik, who would never have returned to the horrors of his past experience, states, "I can't believe I'm here."<sup>15</sup> Through his visceral experience, his story allows the audience to imagine and experience the events of the Holocaust, creating a shared memory. Jean-François Lyotard's belief that after Auschwitz the only outcome of Holocaust history is that of silence matches Srebnik's story in *Shoah*, because in that

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<sup>14</sup> Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

silence, Srebnik shares the real life situation, the killings at Chelmno, where “when they burned two thousand people, Jews every day, it was just as peaceful... Just as it is now.”<sup>16</sup> There was indifference to Srebnik’s “being-in-itself” during his moments on film, and his perception of the world around him was one of “peaceful” silence in which “no one shouted.” Srebnik’s silence while reliving the experience on the river shows the audience that his actual experience, the stamp on his existence, is that in this quiet and peaceful landscape he expresses no emotions. Since he did not make a conscious decision to be defined by these past experiences, he is therefore existing empty of his own will.

Another existential focus of the film is that within the freedom that each victim encounters in their everyday life is the reminder that they are still engaged in the world. The encounter with the other Chelmno survivor defines this philosophy. In this interview, the survivor Mordechai Podchlebnik speaks in the third person. When asked about his experience, he says: “Everything died. But he’s only human. He wants to live. So he must forget. He thanks God for what remains, and that he can forget. And let’s not talk about that.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that this man lived while “everything died” indicates that, in his desire to forget, he wishes to remain in the real life situation of his experiences in the present, since the experiences from the past were ones he did not choose of his own free will. When thinking about the past he refers to himself as if a spectator, as if he is watching the images of another’s suffering, not his own. In the present, however, he interacts in everyday life even though his perception of the world is marked by his

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5.

survival of the Holocaust. The only reason he discusses the Holocaust and his desire to forget it is that Lanzmann is “insisting on it.”

The insistence by Lanzmann to have victims recreate their trauma is best understood in the barber scene with Abraham Bomba. Shot in a barber shop in Israel, Bomba, a barber in the gas chamber at Treblinka, is cutting a man’s hair as he recounts his experiences. By recreating the setting of cutting hair for the victim, Lanzmann’s belief is that both Bomba and the audience will share in the experience because there will be no shroud separating his experiences in Treblinka and the present time. The result is that a shared moment of trauma is created for the audience and the survivor as he relives his memories of Treblinka.

Shot through different angles in the barber shop mirror, the encounter of Bomba’s everyday life, that of cutting hair, reminds him of his harrowing experiences in the gas chamber and he becomes engaged with this past experience. Lanzmann asks, “How did it happen?” At this question Bomba tells Lanzmann that he was in the gas chamber waiting for the transports. His job was to make these women feel like this was not the “last time they’re going to live, they’re going to breathe, or know what is going on.”<sup>18</sup> Lanzmann continues to probe Bomba, trying to recreate his traumatic experiences, to have him relive the moment and create the images of death. He has Bomba demonstrate how he cut these women’s hair. Bomba grabs the man’s hair in the chair, makes quick clipping motions to insinuate the process of cutting long hair, and his eyes start to shift.

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<sup>18</sup> Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film*, 37.

Noticing this shift in emotion, Lanzmann asks, "What was your impression...what did you feel?" Bomba focuses on the scissor's action and starts to describe what it was like when people he knew from his village entered the gas chamber: "I tell you, when a good friend of mine, when his wife and his sister, came into the gas chamber....[silence]...I can't do it...it's too hard. Don't keep me long with that, please."<sup>19</sup> In this moment of silence, Bomba's face goes through a triad of emotions from fear, to tears, to frustration that he is being asked to recount such a personal and traumatic experience. Lanzmann's response is to say, "We have to, you know it." The "we" in this statement is Bomba and the audience and that they have to know what happened in the gas chamber, and relive with Bomba the pain and desperation he and his friend experienced as they tried to "linger with them a second longer, a minute more."<sup>20</sup> Bomba's refusal to be held with his memories for long creates a truth about the trauma of the Holocaust. Because he was a victim of circumstances, he did not choose his existence, a situation that existentialism refers to as facing anguish. The man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not the person he chooses to be, but who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot help escaping the feeling of his total and deep responsibility.<sup>21</sup> By choosing to cut hair, Bomba saved himself and made a decision that affected all those who died in the gas chamber. Bomba's trauma is therefore based on his feelings of deep responsibility and anguish over what he has done.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 18.

The experiences of these three survivors during the Holocaust are each important because they provide a meaningful stamp on these men's existence. Instead of focusing on these experiences as separate however, Lanzmann does not use transitions between each man's testimonial, fusing together the images in a pure existentialist style that encapsulates his belief that "self-rendering" and reliving traumatic experiences results in a shared moral response. In the case of this film, both the victim and the audience imagine and remember the events of the Holocaust together.

### *The Documentary: Perpetrators*

Another example of fusing together testimonies and people's expressions to convey the unspeakable truth of the Holocaust is evident when Lanzmann speaks with the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Lanzmann is an insistent interrogator in these moments on film because he wants to focus on what happened in the Holocaust, how actions were carried out, rather than why they were taken.

At one point in the film Lanzmann shows a small weathered man hanging out of the engine room of a railway car. The scene is shot from an open window in the train and focuses on this man's face as the train moves through pasture land. Slowly, however, the viewer sees an approaching sign framing the background of the shot. As the sign becomes clearer in the distance and the train becomes adjacent to the sign the audience reads *Treblinka* in fine black lettering. The train slowly shudders to a stop and then, almost on cue, the little man who is still in the center of the frame runs his finger across his neck making the signal for death. Whether this was a sign for the train to stop or not,

the audience interprets this action in specific reference to the horrors of Treblinka. The man's facial expression remains stoic and distant even as he makes this diabolical gesture, this silent warning of death.

Lanzmann's use of editing in his film is most evident in this scene because he introduces this perpetrator first by his actions and then by his interview on the train and at his house on the outskirts of the Treblinka camp. The man is identified as Polish train engineer, Henrik Gawkowski, who drove all of the trains into Treblinka filled with cargo, Jews. Lanzmann asks if he, the engineer, could hear what went on in the carriages behind his locomotive. The man states: "No! They were in front! I was driving in back." Making a correction to Lanzmann's and the survivor's belief that he was in front of the Jews, the man establishes an image for the audience that the reality of Treblinka was that he drove the cars into the camp, literally pushing the victims to their slaughter. He then recalls: "The screams from the cars closest to the locomotives could be heard." Lanzmann then asks: "Can one get used to that?" The man replies: "No." Then the man says he was given lots of vodka by the Germans so he could "do the job" and remarks that that was the bonus, they were paid in alcohol not money. He says "those who worked on other trains didn't get that bonus."

The experience that this man shares does not have the same powerful or traumatic effect on the audience as the testimony of the survivors and the re-living of their stories, but it does play a significant role in Lanzmann's desire to create a factual record of the Holocaust. When transposed onto the broader canvas of the film, this man's expressions and his callous responses to the experiences he had during the Holocaust chill the viewer

because he is as impassive as he recalls the same realities of the train's arrival and people being killed as the survivors are.

Sometimes underhanded in his technique of getting the most candid expressions from the perpetrators of Holocaust crimes, Lanzmann resorts to using hidden cameras in his conversations with Nazi officials whom, he assures them, can re-tell their stories in complete confidentiality. The most memorable Nazi interview in the film is with Franz Suchomel, a guard at Treblinka. Lanzmann filmed this interview at what looks like Suchomel's home, as his crew is outside in a Volkswagen van with surveillance recording tools capturing the grainy shots of Suchomel on their tiny television screens. As the hidden microphone starts to pick up the conversation, Lanzmann assures Suchomel: "We're not discussing you, only Treblinka. You are a very important eyewitness and you can explain what Treblinka was." Suchomel responds: "But don't use my name." Lanzmann replies: "No, I promised."

Neal Ascherson writes that by concealing his intrusiveness: "Lanzmann wanted people he questioned to relive the past instead of simply describing it. He wanted them to be 'characters.'"<sup>22</sup> Of his interviewees, Lanzmann himself states:

Not characters of a reconstitution, because the film is not that but, in a certain fashion, it was necessary to transform these people into actors. It is their own history that they recount. But to recount is not sufficient. They must play it, that is to say, derealize. This is what defines the imaginary: to de-realize. Staging is that through which they become characters.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Neal Ascherson, "La Controverse autour de Shoah," trans. Jean-Pierre Bardos, in Claude Lanzmann's *Au sujet de Shoah: Le film de Claude Lanzmann*, ed. Michel Deguy (Paris: Belin, 1990), 231.

<sup>23</sup> Lanzmann, *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 301.



Suchomel, in accordance with Lanzmann's desire to de-realize events, is a perfect "actor" because he is unaware that his exchange is being captured. He is therefore a memorable "character" in the film because he is unashamed to retell the horrors of Treblinka.

Suchomel's expressions remain impassive as he points out different areas of the camp on a large topographical map, retelling how they stacked dead bodies and where the bodies were found rotting in the August sun. The only moment that Suchomel's characteristics change is when he is asked to sing a Nazi song that glorified Treblinka. It is here that his transformation is complete and his eyes light up and he becomes reverent in this memory.

Suchomel clearly does not experience the anguish that Bomba does over his actions. Lanzmann's goal with this interview and that of the train conductor's was to show that the actions of men have a great impact on mankind, yet he also wants to show how these perpetrators do not take responsibility for their actions. Sartre comments that doubtless orders come from the top in war, but they are too broad; the individual interprets them and in this interpretation determines the lives of all others. Even if this decision causes anguish, this does not keep a man from acting, and this action has value only because it is chosen.<sup>24</sup>

A man who lies and makes excuses for himself by saying "not everybody does that," is someone who is uneasy with his conscience because the lying implies that a universal value is conferred upon that lie. What every man must say to himself is, "am I really the kind of man who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide

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<sup>24</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 18-19.

itself by my actions?”<sup>25</sup> By claiming that they were unwillingly forced into action, none of these perpetrators takes responsibility for their actions. Lanzmann’s goal in these interviews in *Shoah* is to show how these men made themselves killers, the system did not.

*The Documentary: Bystanders*

The folk song Simon Srebnik sings in Polish on the Narew River is: “A little white house lingers in my memory. Of that little white house I dream each night.”<sup>26</sup> This song defines what Lanzmann believes dreams to be, the point when one’s mind is disconnected with “things in themselves,” and memory of the past returns. The imagery of the “white house” and the fact that Srebnik sings “of that white house I dream each night” reemerge in the audience’s memory with a single shot of the large white Catholic Church in the town of Chelmno.

The next frame of the film is shot in front of this church where Simon Srebnik, the survivor of Chelmno, stands stoically surrounded by the Polish townspeople. This scene is powerful and disturbing because it is shot with a victim standing amongst the bystanders of the Holocaust. This moment is painful, tragic, and deeply uncomfortable for the viewer and the participant, Srebnik, because he is being re-victimized. Srebnik is visibly upset by this scene. As he stands alone in the middle of the crowd, his eyes sear helplessly and silently into the camera. The only phrase he utters is that he “can’t

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>26</sup> Lanzmann, *Au sujet de Shoah*, 301.

believe” he is there. It is in this moment that Lanzmann asks his only *why* question in the film. He asks these peasants why the Jews were killed and waits for their answers.

Unbelievably, as if in stark contrast to Srebnik’s own role as a singer during the Holocaust, the first person to step forward and give a response is a Mr. Kantorowski, the organ player and singer in the church. As if to justify the Holocaust, this man enacts a doubly displaced blaming of the victim. He states that his friend told him about a story presumably recounted by a rabbi.<sup>27</sup>

The Jews there were gathered in a square. The rabbi asked an SS man: ‘Can I talk to them?’ The SS man said yes. So the rabbi said that around two thousand years ago the Jews condemned the innocent Christ to death. And when they did that, they cried out ‘Let his blood fall on our heads and on our sons’ heads.’ Then the rabbi told them: ‘Perhaps the time has come for that, so let us do nothing, let us go, let us do as we’re asked.’<sup>28</sup>

This story of the rabbi reflects the Christian myth that because of Christ’s death, the Jews had to accept their reality during the Holocaust. The prejudice against the Jews by these Polish peasants is then reinforced by another explanation given by a woman in the crowd as she states: “So Pilate washed his hands and said: ‘Christ is innocent,’ and he sent Barrabas. But the Jews cried out: ‘Let his blood fall on our heads!’ That’s all; now you know!”<sup>29</sup>

While these voices seem to be sympathetic towards the retelling of the Bible story, and the awful truth that more than 200,000 Jews were murdered at Chelmno, their

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<sup>27</sup> LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 114.

<sup>28</sup> Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1995), 89.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

facial expressions never change throughout the scene. They remain indifferent, harsh, and even satisfied. The other expression that remains stationary is Srebnik's look of repression, sorrow, and disbelief. What this church scene dramatizes is the juxtaposition of the victim (Srebnik) and the bystander (the Polish peasants) during the Holocaust. The victim is retraumatized by reliving the past while the bystanders are satisfied with their anti-Semitic and vacuous interpretation of the Holocaust.<sup>30</sup>

### *Responses to Shoah*

The issue of length has always been a problem when looking at the meaningfulness of *Shoah*. Lanzmann's editing has been criticized for being circular and disjointed so that in this eight-and-one half hour film, the seeming repetitiveness of actions, imagery, and silences can be seen as unending and therefore unnecessary. It is as if the subject on film is so vast and significant that any length would be inadequate. However, the viewer might contend, like Dominick LaCapra, that these silences are necessary to transmit to the viewer a muted trauma required for empathetic understanding. What *Shoah* does is indicate a mode of acting-out that when repeated on film brings subtle modulations that attest to the working through of melancholic trauma. The result is that these scenes of survivors, perpetrators and bystanders resist closure and attest to a past that will not and should not pass away, a past that must remain an open wound in the present, representing unrelieved melancholy and desperation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*" in Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 266.

<sup>31</sup> LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 116-117.

People being forced to encounter experiences and discuss emotions are fundamental to *Shoah*. Lanzmann succeeds in his desire to create images with imagination because he has the audience and the interviewee experience the trauma of past situations together. The experiences and events retold by the victims can be remembered by the audience because they are relived. At the time when *Shoah* was made, the post-Vichy period in France as well as the Algerian War and the student protests of May 1968 had taken their toll on the French culture and society by arousing conflict between authority and collective consciousness. That is why, thirty years after *Nuit et brouillard*, *Shoah* offered a new approach to Holocaust film and compelled the French to remember the tragedy on a personal and individual level.

By using the traumatic experiences of Srebnik and Bomba, the Polish locomotive engineer who drove the Jews to their death, the Nazi camp official who relishes in singing the camp song of Treblinka, and the Polish townspeople who speak with much animation, but whose faces tell a different reality, Lanzmann created a tapestry of images that forced the audience to experience and reflect metaphysically on the Holocaust. What Lanzmann exposes was that when looking at the Holocaust, the true nature of the events cannot be expressed by simple, logical definitions because they are prior to all logic and require reconstruction. To prove this point, he rejected chronology and insisted that: "The six million Jews did not die in their own good time and that's why any work that today wants to do justice to the Holocaust must take as its first principle to break with chronology."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Lanzmann, *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 316.

For Lanzmann making *Shoah* was about making the viewer suffer along with the victim. He stated that: "Something that had not been lived must nonetheless be relived."<sup>33</sup> It is with this desire to transfer trauma to the viewer that Lanzmann rejects any character that does not identify or match his vision. Some critics have noticed this aspect when looking at the interviewees in the film. For example, the victims are only Jews, and there is no representation from other groups like political prisoners, Roma and Sinti Gypsies, homosexuals, or Jehovah's Witnesses. All the perpetrators in the film are lower ranking Nazi officials who do not embody the fanatical Nazi ideologies, and seem to present their participation in the Holocaust as "only following orders." Surprisingly it is the bystanders, all Polish peasantry, who are seen as the most virulent of anti-Semites.

While the omission of testimonies from other historical players in the Holocaust is significant, the witnesses that Lanzmann chooses to incorporate in his film are nonetheless integral to the Holocaust. For the memory of the Holocaust to be effective on a collective level in France, the testimonies had to be able to reach a large number of people. *Shoah* succeeds in reaching the masses because it is simple and does not trivialize the trauma and horrors of the Holocaust. The characters are easily identified with because their testimonies allow the audience to imagine the events, creating memories from these images. This is Lanzmann's ultimate goal and the success of his film.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 291.

## CONCLUSION

To complete the analysis of French anti-Semitism in Bordeaux, and the impact of the films *Nuit et brouillard* and *Shoah* on French society, the political and cultural manifestations of this problem in France need to be discussed. While anti-Semitism was never really absent in political life during postwar France, it re-emerged as a vehicle for opposition to the Republic by the Right-wing populist movements in the mid-1950s, and has more recently returned with physical acts of violence.

With the election of Jewish Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France in 1954 and the escalated decolonization of France's foreign lands, Rightist ideology called for society to "watch out for the Jewish dictatorship," and one leader, Pierre Poujade, rallied his followers in overt attacks on Jewish influence. This fear of Jewish rule and the deep rooted anti-Semitism in France led to Poujade's party gaining eleven percent of the vote and earning more than fifty Parliamentary seats in the 1956 elections.<sup>1</sup> While Poujade's party was short-lived, it was the political training ground for Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose National Front has become one of the most significant Right-wing parties in France since the 1930s.

Le Pen has frequently attracted a large proportion of the popular French vote. In 2002 he polled more votes in the first round than the main Leftist candidate Lionel Jospin. However, he ended up losing to Jacques Chirac in the second round. While Le Pen focuses mostly on anti-immigrant xenophobia, his remarks about the gas chambers being a "point of detail" in World War II history reveal his anti-Jewish sentiments which

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<sup>1</sup> Paula E. Hyman, *The Jews of Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 209.

are consistent with the political anti-Semitism in France that have led to the conspiracy theories against the *Juifs d'état* from Léon Blum to Pierre Mendès-France.

Although anti-Semitism in postwar France is most clearly seen in politics, it also takes on other forms. While the Jewish stereotypes that littered the newspapers during Mendès-France's years have declined, the movement for Holocaust denial has gained new strength. This movement, which seeks to prove that the Nazi genocide of European Jewry is fabricated as a Jewish conspiracy to increase their power, was first expressed in 1978 by an ex-Vichy director of the Commissariat-Général aux questions juives, Darquier de Pellepoix. In the magazine *L'Express*, Pellepoix claimed that "True, there were gasings in Auschwitz. But it was lice that were gassed."<sup>2</sup> Maintaining this belief that millions of Jews were not brutally murdered, Robert Faurisson has taken Holocaust denial to a new level in France by bringing together pseudo-scholars to refute the presence of Nazi gas chambers. While this virulent anti-Semitic movement goes against the Gayssot Act, a French statute passed in 1990 to prohibit Holocaust denial, it brings together anti-Semites of the Right and others who seek an ethnically homogenous society in present-day France and view Jews and Israel as the source of all evil in the world.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most shocking results of this Holocaust denial and postwar expression of anti-Semitism in France has been the rising violence against Jewish institutions and individuals since the 1970s. The first attack, which occurred in March of 1979, was directed against a kosher student restaurant in the Latin Quarter; it injured twenty-six

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 210.



people. This incident introduced anti-Semitic terrorism to French soil. The next violent incident occurred in 1980, when a bomb exploded outside a synagogue in the respectable sixteenth *arrondissement* in Paris, killing six Jews. After this attack, the inadequacy of the government's response proved how persistent anti-Semitism was in France.

Raymond Barre, the Prime Minister at the time stated: "this odious act, which was intended to strike Jews going to synagogue, instead struck innocent Frenchmen crossing the Rue Copernic." Implying that the intended Jewish victims were neither innocent, nor French, Barre's unsympathetic statement did nothing to stop the violence against the Jews in France, foreshadowing events to come.<sup>4</sup>

The most violent of all of these acts occurred February 13, 2006, when a 23-year-old French Jew named Ilan Halimi was found naked and handcuffed near a railroad track in the Parisian suburbs. He had burns from acid covering 80 percent of his body, multiple stab wounds, as well as one severed ear and toe. On the way to the hospital, he died from his wounds. Prior to this grisly discovery by police, Halimi had been held captive in the basement of a run-down apartment block in the Parisian *banlieues* for twenty-one days. During this time his kidnappers, an immigrant youth gang called "les gangs de barbares," tortured him and tried to extract a ransom of four hundred and fifty thousand Euros from his family.<sup>5</sup> As news of Halimi's death spread, newspapers called for the capture of this gang who were already claiming responsibility. Yet even at the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Benbassa, "Evitons l'emballement" *Le Monde*, 25 Fevrier 2006.

earliest stage of inquiry into the alleged perpetrators, this murder was already being labeled by journalists as an act of anti-Semitism:

The truth is this: Ilan Halimi was killed with a refined cruelty that does not signify an objective act. The truth is as we thought: Anti-Semitism was the determinant in this torturous act and Ilan Halimi was tortured for the sole reason that he was a Jew.<sup>6</sup>

By drawing attention to the brutality of this crime, the press concluded that Ilan Halimi was tortured because he was a Jew, vindicating the idea that the motive for this crime was based on racism. With this hypothesis and the general acceptance of this belief by the public, the relationship in France among Jews, Arabs, and Muslims was shattered: “Since 2000, the tension between the black Arabs and the Jews in the suburbs has escalated with the memories of the Middle East, racist insults, and physical violence on the rise.”<sup>7</sup> The result of Halimi’s murder was that these “racist insults” escalated to a dangerous level which proved that “aggravated circumstances of anti-Semitism were far from over”<sup>8</sup> and this racial tension was only made worse when investigators started to solve the crime and learned the true motives from the perpetrators.

As days passed after the murder, authorities captured a 17-year-old Iranian immigrant named Corinne Goetzmann as she entered her exams at school. After confessing to selecting Halimi as a target while pretending to shop for a cell phone at the store where he worked, Goetzmann was charged with the: “participation in an organized gang and the kidnapping, holding, and demand for ransom, resulted in acts barbarism,

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Fottorino, “En qualite de juif” *Le Monde*, 25 Fevrier 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Benoit Hopquin, “Juifs-Noirs: Le grand malentendu” *Le Monde*, 22 Avril 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Benbassa, “Evitons l’emballement,” *Le Monde*, 25 Fevrier 2006.

torture, and the death of the victim.”<sup>9</sup> Also arrested in this plot of anti-Semitism and murder were fourteen youths, most of whom were unemployed children of West African immigrants. Among these fourteen arrested was the mastermind of the kidnapping, Youssouf Fofana, the leader of “les gangs des barbares.”

An immigrant from the Ivory Coast, Fofana was the ex-boyfriend of Goetzmann. He confessed that he had planned this murder “completely from anti-Semitic motivation” and on April 5, 2006 a judge charged him with “a major role” consistent with “his anti-Semitic beliefs” which led to the death of his victim.<sup>10</sup> In an interview within following this sentence, the press discovered his anti-Semitic prejudices when he stated that he viewed the Jewish community negatively because they “had money and were kings who flaunted this money over the blacks, who they thought were the slaves of the state.” The Jews were therefore against him and all blacks.<sup>11</sup> It was by these misconceptions of wealth, state conspiracy, and religious hatred that Fofana had Halimi brought to a deserted parking lot where he and his gang were waiting to kidnap him, take him to a run down apartment complex, and torture him to death in the cellar.

In the wake of the torture and killing of Ilan Halimi and the anti-Semitic admission by his perpetrators, attention in France became focused on an undeniable problem, anti-Semitism among France’s second-generation immigrant youth. Their high

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<sup>9</sup> “Une jeune fille d’Ilan Halimi, à été mise en examen a Paris et écrouée” *Le Monde.fr.*, 1 Mars 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Gerard Davet et Piotr Smolar, “Les ‘gang des barbares’ raconte par ses members” *Le Monde*, 22 Mars 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Gerard Davet et Piotr Smolar, “D’après lui, les juifs etaient les rois, car ils bouffaient l’argent de l’Etat” *Le Monde*, 22 Mars 2006.

jobless rate brought to light another problem in French society, racism against Arab and African immigrants fueled by the government.

In response to the racism practiced against them by such figures as Jean-Marie Le Pen, a subculture of another kind of racism started to grow within the French immigrant societies. Ironically, a stereotype and mentality that was started by the anti-Semitic, xenophobic Right, started to grow within the Arab community in which French Jewish wealth was believed to be the cause of immigrant strife. The place where this racism was surging was in the immigrant working class neighborhoods and the schools outside large metropolitan cities, in particular Paris, where a large number of North African Arabs settled as immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s to work in the factories in the suburbs. It was these immigrants who brought anti-Jewish sentiments with them and passed them down to their children. These prejudices have been reinforced over the years by the Palestinian cause, and with the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada against Israel in 2000, anti-Semitic attacks in France skyrocketed.<sup>12</sup>

During this time of racial divide, anti-Semitism, immigrant strife, and political change in France, people are looking towards the current leadership and the role it has played in sparking this full-blown crisis. In the fall of 2005 while still the minister of the interior, the new President Nicolas Sarkozy was quoted as saying about the rioters: “Yes, madame, that’s what I am here for. I’m going to get rid of this scum for you.” By discounting all immigrants as “scum,” and also claiming that “the Vichy government was not an integral participant in genocide, and that France should not be embarrassed by its

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard-Henry Levy, “New-Look Bonaparte” *New York Times Book Review*, Sunday, July 22, 2007, 8.

“civilizing” work in Algeria,” he divided the public opinion in France on largely racist and xenophobic lines.<sup>13</sup>

The philosopher Bernard-Henry Levy has stated that to be a Frenchman in the twenty-first century means to make a choice about certain major and seminal events like Vichy, colonialism, and May 1968. For Sarkozy, who refers to the Holocaust as “that stain on the twentieth century of human history,” and also claims that France should be “proud of its past” and not be “hostage to” or “accountable for” crimes they did not commit.<sup>14</sup> Clearly the indelible French consciousness of guilt after the Vichy regime is not something that inspires his politics.

There is something very disturbing about Sarkozy and his relationship to memory in France. While most French citizens have a memory about historical events that were created by shared experiences, and fit around a national identity, Sarkozy’s memory is at best contradictory and questionable with his interpretations of the “ups and downs in the Arab world” and the Vichy government’s role in the Holocaust. It is this duality between his memory and his vision of France that might prove to be devastating to the harmony of French society. As Levy notes: “How can a man that draws people together with his foreign policy, his generosity, his style, also cause the country to be so profoundly separated?” The only response to this question is for French society to relish in the reconstruction of shared experiences and collective memory. In particular, to look at

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 9.

archival imagery like that presented in *Nuit et brouillard* because it forces the individual to confront that which is difficult and traumatic to remember.

This has proven to be useful for teachers in these marginalized immigrant neighborhoods who are frustrated by how little the government had done to help them counter prejudice, balance equality, and shape Jewish compassion in light of the anti-Semitic racism raging in the suburbs. Many teachers believe that French guilt over colonialism and the Algerian War are overshadowing the memory of Nazi collaboration and the Holocaust. To teach tolerance, some have returned to the past and used documentary film as a way to combat this sharp rise in anti-Semitism. Recently, after a Jewish girl was harassed at her school, the administration decided to show *Nuit et brouillard*, to show the graphic nature of the Holocaust and the Nazi death camps.<sup>15</sup>

A searching testimony to the trauma and horror of the Holocaust, *Nuit et brouillard* provided a specific representation of the Holocaust during a time of moral crisis in France when anti-Semitism and the capitulation by France to Germany remained a mysterious and troubling question to the psyche of the nation. The Holocaust was a subject of shame that the nation tried to evade and push into distant memory during the postwar years, only to be recovered by this film and its specific representation of the Holocaust through the use of archival footage. The result of *Nuit et brouillard* at that time, as well as most recently, is that the Holocaust is contextualized and decisively understood by the audience because they relate instinctively to the imagery displayed on the screen. Because images are more easily understood, they provide a sense of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

transcendence, a shared experience between the individual and collectivity.<sup>16</sup> *Shoah*, unlike *Nuit et brouillard*, shows images of suffering but is ultimately impenetrable because the testimonies of the victims, bystanders, and perpetrators are presented through their recollections of events instead of with the photographic images of the past. Words are therefore harder to conceptualize in ones' mind than images.

For the teachers in this tenuous situation, *Nuit et brouillard* is easier to show than *Shoah* because it bears witness to the traumatic events of the Holocaust while presenting the broader questions about trauma and guilty consciousness through imagery which is experienced collectively. By showing *Nuit et brouillard*, these teachers are able to re-create a shared consciousness which can counter the anti-Semitism of this new immigrant population. What remains to be seen in this shifting society of culturally, religiously, and racially diverse immigrants is whether a sense of postwar Holocaust consciousness can be created today in France. Can these Arab communities from North Africa and elsewhere, which have no postwar sense of Holocaust guilt, and resent the creation of Israel in 1948 and Israel's actions today be included in this French consciousness? Can visual culture such as classical French film help shape this consciousness? Only time will tell if it is possible to defuse the deteriorating climate for French Jews and solve the immigrant crisis facing the French government.

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<sup>16</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 18-19.

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